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Katrina One Year After: Congress's Unfinished Agenda

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A year after one of the most devastating storms in American history ravaged the three-state region along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, Congress still has not taken some of the most obvious and important steps needed to improve the nation's capacity to respond to catastrophic disasters. When Members of Congress return to Washington, they need to focus on initiatives that will help establish a true national response system to meet disasters like Hurricane Katrina.

Where Congress Went Wrong

The House, the Senate, and the President's Homeland Security Council each produced outstanding reports on the aftermath of Katrina, detailing many of the shortfalls and miscues that led to an inadequate response to the terrible disaster. When it came to trying to improve how the nation reacts to catastrophes, however, many in Congress have fixated on the role of Washington, assuming that more and bigger government and throwing more money at the problem are the best solutions. That is the wrong way to improve the national response.

What's Needed

Dealing with disasters is primarily the responsibility of states and local communities. Empowering them by building an effective national response and providing the right federal resources to back them up when they are overwhelmed by catastrophic disasters requires something more sensible than worrying what's being done inside the Beltway.

Here are three reasonable steps for Congress to improve disaster response:

1. **Reform the Grant Formulas.** Washington's approach to funding state and local security has been flawed from the start. The Patriot Act requires a significant portion of homeland security grants to be divided among the states without regard to need or risk. As a result, 40 percent of the state grants are simply entitlements. Dumping money on states doesn't make them safer. Most of the millions given to Louisiana was used to purchase equipment that languished under six feet of water after Katrina. Grants should not be based on past funding or state population but on risk, vulnerability, and national priorities—most critically those initiatives that help build a national system that allows states and local government to coordinate their responses. Congress should repeal or substantially reduce the congressionally mandated state minimums.
2. **Create Regional Homeland Security Outreach Offices.** The country needs a national homeland security system that mobilizes state and local governments and public safety officials as partners in intelligence, emergency response, and

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domestic counterterrorism. For more effective coordination between these different levels of government, Congress must insist that the Department of Homeland Security create regional field offices, as required by the Homeland Security Act of 2002.

3. **Increase Coast Guard Modernization Funding.** The Coast Guard saved 33,000 lives in the wake of Katrina and was the single most effective federal responder supporting the efforts of state and local governments. Yet the Coast Guard's modernization program is seriously underfunded. The Coast Guard needs at least \$1.5 billion per year for modernization.

What Next

Congress should stop looking to Washington to solve every homeland security problem. Instead, to improve the nation's capacity to respond to catastrophe, Congress should consider modest and commonsense initiatives that would make all Americans safer.

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