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Beltway-Centric Approach to Disaster Response Is a Recipe for Disaster

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On June 11, 2008, the House Homeland Security Committee (HHSC) held a hearing to examine whether the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is ready to lead relief efforts in the event of a major U.S. catastrophe. Despite the vast amount of resources dedicated to improving DHS's disaster-response capacity, the consensus of the hearing was that the organization is unprepared to provide adequate post-disaster leadership.

Given the number of cataclysmic events that have recently befallen the United States and the tax revenue spent combating the ineffective responses to these events, the hearing's conclusion is problematic. Yet the answer to this dilemma is that Washington should do less, not more. Congress must recognize the federal government's limitations with regard to disaster response and press DHS to facilitate the creation of a comprehensive grassroots response network comprising federal, state, and local governments as well as nonprofits and the private sector.

Recipe for Disaster. Since 9/11, disaster response has become increasingly federalized. Federal disaster declarations are at an all-time high, and Congress seems dedicated to policy initiatives focused on the role of DHS in disaster response. For example, a recent HHSC report on mass gatherings included a plethora of federally based policy initiatives. However, by providing a false assurance that Washington will be able to provide immediate or effective assistance, over-federalization increases the risk that states will not be prepared for catastrophe.

The lag time between the advent of a disaster and the arrival of federal assistance can be significant. The reality is that states, local municipalities, and the private sector must lead relief efforts in the wake of a major disaster. The federal government may require days to identify needs, marshal resources, and respond to a devastating event that exceeds a state's response capacity. The first 72 hours of a disaster, as demonstrated by calamities such as Hurricane Katrina, are a critical period in which aid can make a difference: Lives can be saved and essential infrastructure restored.

Shift the Focus Outside the Beltway. In order to maximize our nation's ability to respond to disasters effectively, Congress must shift its focus outside the Beltway. Rather than leading all catastrophe-relief efforts, DHS should act as a vehicle to ensure that state, local, nonprofit, and private-sector entities are well-prepared for disasters. The need for such a shift has been widely noted. For instance, during the June 11 HHSC hearing, the Director of the Alabama Department of Homeland Security emphasized the need to empower states and create community-based programs to assist disaster victims effectively.

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A federalized approach to disaster response is not only poor policy, but also eliminates the ability of the states to choose the right course of action for their citizens, a role protected under state police power. The degradation of this power violates the constitutional separation of powers between the states and the federal government. DHS must respect the tenets of federalism by reversing the federalization of disaster.

A Network-Based Approach. A decentralized approach to preparedness is essential to effective disaster response. DHS should focus on creating a regionally based network of federal, state, local, nonprofit, and private-sector entities.

This network should operate under a grassroots structure in which state and local organizations are tasked with on-the-ground implementation of disaster response efforts, ensuring the agile flow of resources and manpower between the states in the wake of disaster. This structure is essential to eliminate the lag time between the advent of disaster and the federal response.

Streamline Congressional Oversight. The urgent need to consolidate oversight of DHS was reiterated during the June 11 HHSC hearing. As a result, Congress should consolidate oversight of DHS into the standing homeland security committees.

Currently, jurisdiction over homeland security issues is held by a vast number of committees. Such a jurisdictional structure is illogical, is impractical, and erodes the delineated role of Congress in checking executive branch power. Indeed, DHS is forced to testify at duplicative hearings and respond to reporting requirements from 86 different committees and subcommittees.

Committees unrelated to homeland security are often uninformed on homeland security issues and therefore treat oversight as a political game in which DHS is the inevitable loser. Until Congress streamlines the oversight process, it will be difficult for DHS to facilitate, let alone lead, post-disaster relief efforts effectively.

Recognizing Federal Limitations. Congress must enact policy that respects the principles of federalism and recognizes the limitations on the federal government's ability to respond effectively to disasters. Beltway-centric solutions that insist upon expanding rather than refining the role of the federal government in disaster response could have devastating consequences.

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