

# WebMemo



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## As Gustav Lands, There Are Lessons to Be Learned

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Hurricane Gustav, the largest and most dangerous storm to make landfall in recent years, roars ashore today. No doubt, politicians and pundits will be quick to make comparisons to the disaster response three years ago after Hurricane Katrina ravaged millions of square miles over three states and devastated coastal areas, including the city of New Orleans.

In the wake of Katrina, the federal government received withering criticism. While the federal effort was, as President Bush rightly concluded, “inadequate,” much of the most sensational media reporting proved inaccurate and shrill partisan attacks on the Administration overblown. Yet these initial impressions did much to shape public perceptions, leading Congress to push for proposals that did little to improve—and in some cases detracted from—the ability of the nation to prepare for large-scale catastrophes. If these mistakes are not to be repeated after Gustav, Washington will have to be more sober in assessing federal responsibilities for dealing with large-scale national disasters.

**Dealing with Disasters.** Regardless of how serious this storm turns out to be or the successes or failures of the response, the principles of responding to disasters probably will not change.

In “normal” disasters—whether terrorist strikes like 9/11 or a natural disaster such as a flood or snowstorm—a tiered response is employed. Local leaders turn to state resources when local resources are exhausted. In turn, states look to Washington when their means are exceeded. Both local and state

leaders play a critical role in effectively communicating their requirements to federal officials and managing the response. In most disasters, local resources handle things in the first hours and days until national resources can be requested, marshaled, and rushed to the scene. That usually takes days. With the exception of a few federal assets such as the Coast Guard and Urban Search and Rescue, teams do not roll in until after the response is well under way.

Disasters such as Katrina and Gustav are different. In catastrophic disasters, tens or hundreds of thousands of lives are immediately at risk. State and local resources may well be exhausted from the onset and government leaders unable to determine or communicate their priority needs. And unlike New York after 9/11, there are few places to which communities can turn for immediate help. Surrounding cities could quickly pitch in over intact bridges, roads, and waterways. The small communities around cities, like those around New Orleans, have little extra capacity and indeed may well be victims themselves. National resources have to show up in hours, not days, and they are needed in unprecedented amounts regardless of the difficulties. For some contingencies, like hurricanes, national assets need to be

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on the scene even before the disaster strikes. That is a very different requirement for mounting a national response to normal disasters.

The federal government does have a unique and important role to play. Only the federal government can build a national response system to mobilize the resources of the nation in the face of a catastrophic disaster. In virtually every instance, however, state and local leaders will remain in charge, and national assets—whether they come from other states, the private sector, or the federal government—will be in support of their efforts. One lesson that should not be learned from the disaster of Hurricane Katrina is that all the answers to addressing the needs of America in the face of a catastrophic disaster are to be found in Washington.

**Lessons Learned.** Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has done much to improve national coordination for disaster response during his tenure. Much of that progress was already evident before Gustav made landfall, the most visible being vastly improved federal, state, and local coordination in evacuating New Orleans.

The greatest strength in the national response to Katrina, however, will likely be the nation's most important asset in the wake of Gustav as well: the outpouring of support by individuals, communities, and faith-based organizations that mobilized in support of their fellow Americans. Here, too, Washington plays a supporting role in encouraging and organizing—rather than mobilizing and directing—the citizen response.

**Lessons Not to Be Learned.** What Washington should not do in the wake of Gustav is follow the lead of Congress after Katrina and attempt to make national disaster response more “Washington-centric.” Centralized preparedness and response will never be timely and flexible enough to meet local needs in a large-scale disaster. In addition, such approaches undermine the Constitutional principle of federalism. Congress should reject efforts to make Americans more dependent on Washington. In particular, Congress and the Administration should:

- *Stop doling out billions in homeland security grants.* Rather than build up local capabilities,

many communities use these funds to simply supplant their own emergency preparedness spending. The 9/11 Commission warned that grants were in danger of becoming “pork barrel” legislation. The Commission was right. Grants have made state and local governments more dependent on Washington but have done a poor job improving national capacity for responding to large-scale disasters.

- *Stop over-federalizing disaster responses.* The number of declared “federal disasters” has skyrocketed since the 1990s. Declarations and deployments, while “politically” popular, distract time and resources from preparing for truly catastrophic disasters such as Katrina, and they create the unrealistic expectation that in the event of a crisis, Washington will solve all the problems.
- *Stop expanding federal disaster insurance coverage.* Congress is considering disaster insurance legislation that represents a bigger danger to the American economy than a catastrophic hurricane season. Congress continues to forget one of the best lessons from Hurricane Katrina: Despite the fact that Katrina was the most expensive disaster in U.S. history (\$133.8 billion), the insurance market survived due to the reinsurance market. In fact, in some cases, the insurance companies were reporting sizable profits within one year.

**Disasters from Disasters.** Katrina was used as an excuse to try to make more federal spending and more federal control the answer for responding to disasters. Regardless of the outcome of Gustav and the sufficiency of the national response, some pundits and politicians will likely push for making national disaster preparedness and response more Washington-centric. Congress should reject such solutions.

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