POLICY STORMS OF THE CENTURY

BY K. DANIEL GLOVER



METEOROLOGICALLY SPEAKING, the hurricane that slammed into the Gulf Coast on August 29 died days later in the northern part of the continent. Politically speaking, Katrina is very much alive, and its eye has settled over Washington for the foreseeable future.

Shortly after the storm, Congress cleared two emergency spending bills totaling more than $60 billion. And lawmakers, as is typical, are also trying to make sure that their pet policy ideas ride the hurricane-induced legislative wave moving through the capital. But the real test of Katrina's staying power will be whether the storm spawns substantive changes in federal disaster mitigation, just as its most infamous atmospheric siblings have done in the past.



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MISSISSIPPI IN 1927: After this massive flood, Congress started thinking it could do more to protect Americans from "acts of God."

Throughout history, hurricanes have captured the attention of government leaders, and President William McKinley was chief among them. Raymond Arsenault, a historian at the University of South Florida, recently noted on the History News Network (*hnn.us*) that the near-annihilation of Cedar Key, Fla., and the deaths of more than 100 people in an 1896 hurricane made a lasting impression on McKinley—one that eventually influenced his military strategy.

"I am more afraid of West Indian hurricanes than I am of the entire Spanish navy," McKinley said at the start of the Spanish-American War some two years later. That fear inspired the president to order the creation of a hurricane warning system designed to protect vessels in the Caribbean Sea.

Congress, for its part, has long been responding to hurricanes and other disasters by providing monetary relief. In a 1950 document printed in the Congressional Record, Rep. Harold Hagen, R-Minn., charted such federal aid back to 1803. Lawmakers have provided aid in the wake of everything from "Indian depredations" in the mid-1800s, to "grasshopper ravages" in the 1870s, to the kinds of disasters more familiar today: tornadoes, droughts, earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, and hurricanes.

The earliest hurricane-related federal spending that Hagen recorded came in 1928, after a September storm hit Puerto Rico. Congress provided $8.1 million to rehabilitate agriculture and schoolhouses and to purchase seeds. Two years later, lawmakers allocated $1 million to cover repair work by the Puerto Rican Hurricane Relief Commission, and they gave the commission loan breaks in 1935. Another $5 million went toward forest rehabilitation in New England after a hurricane struck there in September 1938.

Not every disaster has been what Claire Rubin, a disaster research consultant and the co-author of the Disaster Time Line on the Internet (*www.disaster-timeline.com*), calls a "defining event." In fact, no defining events occurred until well into the 20th century.

Even the Category 4 hurricane that swamped Galveston Island off Texas in 1900, killing at least 6,000 people, failed to push the federal government into the disaster-mitigation business. Although Congress did react to that tragedy, according to Casey Greene, the head of special collections at Galveston's Rosenberg Library, lawmakers merely funded extensions of the seawall, in part to protect federal military reservations. Funding for the extensions was authorized in installments from 1904 through 1950, Greene said in an e-mail exchange with *National Journal*.

Other major hurricanes, including Category 4 storms in 1909, 1915, and 1928, made landfall in the early decades of the century. Yet not until the massive flooding of the Mississippi River in 1927 did lawmakers start thinking they could do more to protect Americans from "acts of God." They passed the 1928 Flood Control Act, which gave the federal government authority over flood control on the Mississippi and moved from a levee-only system to one based on dams and reservoirs.

The New Deal changed the public's attitudes about a social safety net, amplifying the move toward more federal involvement. "The public's willingness to bear a portion of disaster losses dates back to the early 1930s," the General Accounting Office wrote in a 1980 report on the history of flood control, crop insurance, and federal reimbursement for property losses.

But the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 showed that even President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the father of the New Deal,

could dodge responsibility for natural disasters. The Category 5 storm was the strongest ever to hit the United States, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and it hit a politically significant population: veterans of World War I whom FDR had sent to the Florida Keys to work on a New Deal highway project.

More than 400 people died in the hurricane. The supervisors of the veterans' camps failed to heed hurricane warnings or send for a train to evacuate the area until it was too late. The hurricane's 18-foot storm surge overturned the train before the veterans and other residents could board.

Republican lawmakers, led by Rep. Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts, tried to pin the blame on FDR during congressional hearings. But Rep. John Rankin, D-Miss., a Roosevelt ally, chaired the hearings and managed them in a way that largely shielded the president from criticism. Rankin dismissed Rogers's attacks as "silly efforts ... to play politics."

Rogers nevertheless made a final stand on the House floor when the chamber considered a bill to compensate the families of hurricane victims. "I blame no one person, but a number" of people, she said, "and I hold this government directly responsible for the death and injury of those veterans." Rep. Harry Sauthoff, a Wisconsin Progressive, added: "It must be remembered that the government put them there. The government had a responsibility and a duty." But after the aid to the families became law, the hurricane was eventually forgotten.

Congress pushed the government further into the disaster arena in 1950 with passage of the first Federal Disaster Relief Act, the measure that Hagen advocated when he outlined his 147-year history of aid. "It simply establishes a fund to enable the government to give direct relief to these disaster areas when disasters arise, rather than having to come to Congress in each instance," Rep. Edward Cox, D-Ga., said during floor debate.

A year earlier, Congress had created the Farmers Home Administration, and in 1953, it created the Small Business Administration. Loans from these two programs, and from the Federal Crop Insurance Corp., became the foundation of federal disaster assistance. Neither the 1950 law nor the three agencies were created in direct response to hurricanes, but all were in place in time for three major hurricanes in 1954: Carol, Edna, and Hazel.

Like Katrina, the next two hurricanes to demand lawmakers' attention hit the Gulf Coast. Hurricane Betsy came first, in 1965, followed by Hurricane Camille four years later. Both triggered significant changes in disaster law.

After Betsy, Congress quickly enacted the 1965 Southeast Hurricane Disaster Relief Act. The statute provided aid to flood victims and ordered a study on flood insurance. President Johnson noted upon signing the bill that disaster aid had been broadened six times during "the unusually severe succession of disasters" over the previous 18 months, but he added that all of those steps had occurred "on an emergency basis." Johnson advocated a permanent system of flood insurance, and the study ordered under the law eventually led to just that: the 1968 National Flood Insurance Act.



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FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, RICHARD NIXON: Roosevelt dodged responsibility for the Labor Day hurricane of 1935. Nixon complained in 1970 that federal disaster assistance had "grown in a piecemeal and often haphazard manner."

A year later, Camille battered the Gulf Coast again, and then caused flash floods in Virginia after moving inland. More than 100 people died not far from the seat of the federal government. President Nixon responded in 1970 with an appeal for a new law to address the "gaps and overlaps" in the existing "complex program" of disaster relief.

"The last presidential message on the subject of disaster assistance was written 18 years ago," Nixon said. "Since that time, this program has grown in a piecemeal and often haphazard manner, involving 50 separate congressional enactments and executive actions."

Among other things, Nixon proposed a law that offered two extra years of unemployment benefits to hurricane victims, low-interest loans to local governments that lost property-tax revenue because of disasters, and the repair or replacement of public facilities. He also favored steps to simplify and speed debris removal from private property. Congress largely endorsed his proposal in passing the 1970 Federal Disaster Relief Act. Rubin said it is "the basic enabling act for the kinds of things [that the Federal Emergency Management Agency] does" today.

Hurricane Agnes hit next, in 1972, prompting Nixon to say this in a national radio address: "Confronted with so massive a disaster emergency, our response as a nation must also be massive. Conscience commands it; humanity impels it." Then, two years later, spurred in part by a tornado in Xenia, Ohio, Congress amended the 1970 law. Nixon said the action "truly brings the New Federalism to our disaster preparedness and assistance activities."

Policy makers have continued to follow that pattern ever since, with the intensity of each disaster dictating the intensity of the response. "There has been a tendency ... in response to large disasters to reshape and often expand the federal role," said Rutherford Platt, a professor at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst). He said that the trend has grown stronger during the past 25 years and suggested that "the era of hazard mitigation" really hit its stride in the Clinton administration.

"Every few years," added Rubin, "something comes along that causes them to change the system." Despite what she calls an unprecedented attempt to politicize Hurricane Katrina, she said that the latest disaster will be a defining event. "The partisan fury is temporary, I think, although I expect it to continue for the recovery planning phase," Rubin said. "Ultimately, even congressmen will come to grips with the need for a new approach to dealing with catastrophic events." ■

The author, the managing editor of National Journal's Technology Daily, can be reached at dglover@nationaljournal.com.