Expanding Federal Power: The Real Lessons of Hurricane Katrina

New Government Programs Mean Expanded Federal Powers and Increased Dependence on Government

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Hurricane Katrina was in many ways a disaster of nearly unprecedented proportions for the United States. To be sure, we have suffered disasters before. San Francisco was heavily damaged by an earthquake and a fire in 1906. Chicago succumbed to a raging fire set off, according to urban legend of the time, by the unfortunate Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. Galveston was destroyed by a hurricane in 1900. In terms of death toll, however, Katrina remains the worst natural disaster in American history.

Katrina, though, was special, in that word may be used to describe the horrendous damage wrought by the storm. It destroyed not only life and limb, but also damaged and shuttered much of the nation’s critical energy infrastructure, caused the submergence and unprecedented abandonment of one of the world’s truly great cities (itself a strategically important port city), and obliterated, literally, communities throughout the region. The damage was so great, so terrible, that many questioned the very idea of rebuilding.

The tragedy of the 2005 hurricane season, though, is not confined to its immediate effects on lives and property. The unprecedented scale of disaster has created a similarly unprecedented opportunity for those who would seek to expand the power and reach of the federal government. The Bush administration, in fact, is now doing its best to emulate the left-wing socialism of a previous Texan administration, that of Lyndon Johnson. As Bush told the nation on September 15, his administration is planning not only to subsidize the physical rebuilding of affected areas, but also the social reconstruction of the region.

“When communities are rebuilt, they must be even better and stronger than before the storm,” Bush said. (Emphasis added.) “Within the Gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historical places in America. As all of us saw on television, there’s also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.”

Before confronting any such problem, it is necessary to make a clear-eyed evaluation of the situation. This, of course, is not being done by the Bush administration in its overbearing eagerness to recreate the Johnson administration’s “Great Society.” Nevertheless, the situation must be evaluated, if not by the Bush administration, then by citizens who will be affected by the government’s actions.

There are, in fact, lessons to be learned from the hurricane and its aftermath. First, the ongoing federal war on poverty destroys initiative and creates a dangerous dependence on the federal government that can lead to both paralysis and anarchy during times of crisis. Moreover, the ongoing federal social-welfare programs, instead of eliminating poverty, actually tend to create more poverty, for the simple reason that whatever you subsidize increases in quantity. Second, government is most responsive when its various functions are handled at the lowest level, as close to the people as possible, the appropriate level depending on the specifics of what needs to be done. This must be determined by those present at the problem; it can’t be decided within a distant bureaucracy a thousand miles away.

**THE ADMINISTRATION’S PLAN**

For those who have paid any attention whatsoever to the Bush administration since it first took office, there has never been any doubt about its true nature. Republicans and movement conservatives have been eager to depict Bush as a solidly conservative leader. This has never been true, of course. Since taking office, Bush has done nearly everything he can to expand the powers of government. From the No Child Left Behind Act, which put the Fed in the schools to an unprecedented degree (recall that even Reagan once gave lip service to the idea of abolishing the Federal Department of Education), to new initiatives to put men on the Moon and on Mars, to the diabolically open-ended and misuse “War on Terrorism,” Bush has sought to expand government at every turn. Katrina has provided Bush another opportunity for federal expansion.

President Bush has called for bold federal action to rebuild New Orleans and surrounding communities on the Gulf Coast in the wake of the devastation wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In his September 15 speech, the president urged the creation of three new federal programs. He first proposed a “Gulf Opportunity Zone.” According to the president, “Within this zone, we should provide immediate incentives for job-creating investment, tax relief for small businesses, incentives to companies that create jobs, and loans and loan guarantees for small businesses, including minority-owned enterprises, to get them up and running again.”

Bush next suggested creating Worker Recovery Accounts for evacuees. Under these, “the federal government would provide accounts of up to $5,000 which these evacuees could draw upon for job training and education to help them get a good job, and for child care expenses during their job search.” Finally, he recommended that Congress pass an Urban Homesteading Act under which “we will identify property in the region owned by the federal government, and provide building sites to low-income citizens free of charge through a lottery. In return, they would pledge to build on the lot, with either a mortgage or help from a charitable organization like Habitat for Humanity.”

Of course, to accomplish all this and to ensure that no disaster cripples part of the nation ever again, the federal government needs more power to respond to emergencies. Explained Mr. Bush: “Our cities must have clear and up-to-date plans for responding to natural disasters, and disease outbreaks, or a terrorist attack, for evacuating large numbers of people in an emergency, and for providing the food and water and security they would need. In a time of terror threats and weapons of mass destruction, the danger to our citizens reaches much wider than a fault line or a flood plain. I consider detailed emergency planning to be a national security priority, and therefore, I’ve ordered the Department of Homeland Security to undertake an immediate review, in cooperation with local counterparts, of emergency plans in every major city in America.” Naturally, Bush made no mention of which section of the Constitution authorizes the federal government to either manage local disasters or conduct reviews of municipalities’ disaster policies and procedures.

As radical as this vision is, Bush still wasn’t through. In his post-Katrina America, U.S. armed forces could conceivably turn the nation into a garrison state—for our own protection, of course. After noting the lack of coordination in the response to Katrina by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Bush issued his most controversial call: “It is now clear that a challenge on this scale requires greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces—the institution of our government most capable of massive logistical operations on a moment’s notice.” To that end, Bush ordered his cabinet secretaries to review the federal response to the disaster. “This government will learn the lessons of Hurricane Katrina,” Bush promised (or warned, depending on your perspective). “We’re going to review every action and make necessary changes, so that we are better prepared for any challenge of nature, or act of evil men, that could threaten our people.”

How much is all this going to cost? The cost to liberty will be incalculable. In dollars, Congress immediately appropriated $61.8 billion in emergency relief. But this is only the start. One Congressional Budget Office estimate places the total cost of rebuilding the region as high as $200 billion. FEMA will get $60 billion, portions of which are already contracted to corporations such as the Shaw Group ($100 million) and Bechtel ($100 million), among others, for reconstruction work. Another $400 million will go to the Army Corps of Engineers. Another $1.9 billion will go to the Department of Defense for repairs on damaged bases. Since Bush refuses to raise taxes, all the money will be borrowed mostly from foreign central banks, which means that the national debt will go up even higher (it has reached $8 trillion as of this writing). Bush, however, pledged, “We will do what it takes” to rebuild the area—the hundreds of buildings, roads, bridges, and businesses that dot the area.

THE NEWLY VISIBLE UNDERCLASS

Just prior to Katrina, the U.S. Census Bureau released figures indicating that since the turn of the millennium, poverty in America has been increasing. According to these figures, as of 2004 some 37 million Americans lived in poverty—over a million more than in 2003.

This poverty had a role to play in the Katrina disaster. At first, it was mystifying that so many people did not flee New Orleans, knowing that the storm was coming. Katrina hit, and the next day, the levees built to withstand only a Category Three storm broke. This flooded the city and stranded thousands of people without food, electricity, or clean water. Why were these people still in New Orleans? Because nearly 30 percent of those living in the city were beneath the poverty line. They had no way out. Their number included the sick, the elderly, and the disabled as well as many of what quickly became a newly visible underclass. They didn’t own cars or have familiar or social networks enabling them to escape. The social safety net failed. While reports of atrocities by roving gangs (rapes, for example) appear to have been gross exaggerations, New Orleans and the surrounding area suddenly took on the appearance of something out of a third-world nation.

How could this have happened after decades of federal efforts aimed, supposedly, at the eradication of poverty? Such a question can’t be answered without revisiting the hoary debate over the causes of poverty, about which liberals and conservatives have traditionally lined up on opposite sides of a now very rusty fence. How much poverty is due to poverty-inducing behaviors, and how much is due to circumstances beyond the person’s control? And do top-down government actions tend to reduce or actually encourage poverty by rewarding poverty-inducing behaviors?

Most human social reality has more than one cause, and poverty is no exception. People can end up poor through no fault of their own. A
manufacturing plant that provided jobs to thousands but then closes and relocates overseas in order to take advantage of cheap labor leaves poverty behind in the region it once called home. Standards of living immediately drop when new jobs pay just a fraction of the old or come without health benefits. The “working poor” usually cannot afford private health insurance. An unanticipated illness causing a long period with no income can precipitate financial disaster for an individual or a family.

Why are there so many “working poor” in this tragic situation? The main reason is the absence of jobs that pay wages sufficient to lift them above the poverty line. A specific factor we can look at here is the so-called North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). According to the Economic Policy Institute, some one million U.S. jobs have been displaced since NAFTA went into effect on January 1, 1994. Two-thirds of these jobs were in manufacturing industries, although every major occupation was affected in every state in the union. NAFTA’s defenders contend that it created jobs, but the “service sector” jobs (customer service representatives, telemarketers, waiters and waitresses, and the notorious burger flippers) paid far less than what was displaced.

In concert with the NAFTA-induced exodus of jobs has been a corresponding influx of illegal aliens competing with American workers for scarce jobs. Our current immigration crisis can be traced to the Immigration Act of 1965, which made it easier for non-Europeans to cross our borders legally. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with immigration so long as immigrants respect the rule of law and are willing to assimilate, learn English, and adapt to American culture. In recent decades, however, the trickle of illegal immigrants became a flood that has increased to the point where thousands are crossing our border from Mexico every day. They are working in jobs that would otherwise be held by Americans. Because of their illegal status, they are willing also to work for low pay and no benefits, thus driving down wages for Americans. But they are here because of the absence of jobs in Mexico. NAFTA is part of this story, too. An anonymous illegal alien from Mexico once commented in an interview, “If NAFTA had worked, we wouldn’t be here.”

Many of the welfare programs introduced during the “war on poverty” of the 1960s had the predictable result of making poverty intractable. In launching what was then called an “unconditional war on poverty in America,” the Johnson administration expanded Medicare and created Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Head Start, the Job Corps, and Medicaid. The Nixon administration continued or expanded these programs. The welfare state burgeoned. Instead of ending poverty, however, these programs institutionalized it by creating dependency. Charles Murray, author of such well-known books as Losing Ground, wrote that “the expansions in public welfare… led to disincentives to work, a corruption of values and thus welfare resulted in more welfare.”

Murray understood that if you believe the federal government is going to take care of you, you’ll behave accordingly. And since the 1960s, millions of people have come to expect government to take care of them through welfare programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children. People dependent on government largesse for their welfare become unable to care for themselves. In the South as Katrina approached, this created a dangerous and deadly situation. In the end, thousands of people were unable to do anything to help themselves when disaster struck on August 29. Instead, they waited for the federal government to come to the rescue! Yet, as Bush conceded, the federal response was inept and inadequate, as—befitting a lethargic, distant bureaucracy—it was bound to be.

Of course, the tragedy was not alone to be found in the poor who were left defenseless in the wake of nature’s wrath. The tragedy too was that government intervention, when it came, brought government force. And this is a lesson that needs to be learned.

When the government called in the military, the humanitarian mission in New Orleans became a military operation, and as such, people in the city were treated like subjects of a military occupation rather than as free citizens of a Republic. People were forced against their will to leave their properties. People were forced against their will to remain in dangerously unsanitary holding pens like the Superdome. People were even forced to surrender their firearms. In the face of disaster, the freedoms of the people, the protection of which caused the government to be created in the first place, were squashed by that very government. There is a clear lesson here. When you give the government the power to save, you give the government the power to destroy.

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REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS

There is no question that New Orleans must be rebuilt! There must be a port where the great Mississippi flows into the Gulf, and a port cannot exist without a city. New Orleans is a crucial city, historically, culturally, and economically. Because of its importance, abandoning the Big Easy is not an option. Failure to rebuild will leave the nation devoid of one of its most crucial ports, will leave many without the homes and businesses and properties they long to return to, and will leave a nearly irreplaceable void in the nation’s cultural life. But who bears responsibility for this rebuilding project? One thing is for sure: it should not be the federal government!

In fact, there is no need for federal involvement, as the response of the private sector to Katrina abundantly illustrates. Arguably, Katrina brought out what has always been best in the American people—their natural empathy and generosity. It is not in the nature of Americans to allow others to suffer without doing something about it. Millions of Americans have donated money, foodstuffs, and clothing to the evacuees who were transported to their cities and towns. Many have donated time and additional effort attempting to see to it that the necessary goods found their way into the hands of those needing
them. They have worked through churches, businesses, charitable organizations, and personal networks. Local authorities have seen to it that the evacuees had places to sleep. Schools have opened their doors to their children. What we have seen over the past couple of months is a spontaneous relief effort that emerged from all across the land. It even included large corporations like Wal-Mart.

New Orleans was a sufficiently beloved city that I can visualize many people taking out time and effort to assist in what will doubtless be a colossal rebuilding effort—an effort holding out better hope of building the “better and stronger” New Orleans about which President Bush spoke.

Catholic social thinkers sometimes speak of a principle of subsidiarity—the principle of solving problems at the most local level possible, and only moving to higher levels of governmental authority for problems proving intractable at the local level. Subsidiarity is the principle that should guide us here. Those evacuees who want to return ought to be allowed to direct as much traffic as possible. Those closest to the problems are all too aware of what they lost to the storm and its aftermath, and so are in the best position to know how they want things to look when they are back in place. Subsidiarity also ensures that those at the local level who are engaged in rebuilding their own properties and lives will have the greatest possible degree of control over the decisions they are making. This is the essence of freedom and the beginning of dignity, both of which will be squashed should rebuilding efforts be dictated and controlled by a central authority in Washington.

Nevertheless, many will not accept an approach based on subsidiarity. Of course, those who support welfare-statism will call it heartless, accusing those advocating private solutions of not minding if people flounder helplessly. Nothing could be further from the truth. The evacuees are not on their own! While of course there are countless hours of work still to be done—work that will take months if not years—the work will be done? Federal power, on the other hand, has proven itself to be an extremely blunt instrument.

What could be more heartless than the kinds of stories that emerged from New Orleans during the days when FEMA was in charge? Example: the woman seen sobbing alongside the road when a FEMA official would not allow her to take her dog with her on a bus. Her pet was the one thing she had salvaged from her ruined home, and a government employee with a bureaucratic, follow-the-rules mindset refused to allow her to keep it. Or think of FEMA’s notorious refusals to allow shipments of goods from Wal-Mart and the Red Cross to be delivered. Or FEMA’s blocking off all exits from the ruined city. Speaking more generally, wouldn’t it be more heartless for the federal government to keep in place all the programs that brought about the cycles of poverty whose effects were evident in the wrecked New Orleans?

The idea of allowing the American people to act spontaneously to rebuild New Orleans and the other ruined communities on the Gulf Coast will not sit well with the bureaucratic mind. It would mean taking control away from those who ardently desire to exercise control over the lives of others. It will seem simplistic and messy to them: simplistic because it trusts the essential goodness of the American people and their capacity to respond to the suffering of others, messy because it won’t assume the kind of centralization that has been falling into place over the past several decades. But people will have the dignity that comes with the freedom to make their own choices. And their choices will be better absent the graft and waste always associated with government projects; they will achieve far more for less money; and absent federally subsidized flood insurance, they will be less likely to build in high-risk areas—and thereby avoid the horrific devastation that always occurs in those areas whenever the next hurricane rolls through.

THE DANGER AHEAD

Hurricane Katrina revealed poverty and desperation—but also the natural generosity and kindness of Americans who have never been willing to let others suffer needlessly. It also revealed the inherent weakness of centralization and, alarmingly, it revealed also an administration eager to justify the assumption of new, and potentially abusive, powers. The real lessons of Katrina are that acts of power, exercised in top-down fashion by the federal government, are not the way to go.

In the wake of the storm, Bush promised “one of the largest reconstruction efforts the world has ever seen.” The federal response to Katrina can be seen as an instance of this administration’s overriding tendency to respond to each new crisis with a call for more power. The 9/11 attacks saw the creation of the Orwellian Homeland Security Agency and the draconian USA Patriot Act. Both have since been expanded by new legislation from a Congress willing to go right along with the president. Earlier this year we saw the passage of the Real ID Act, which arguably gives every U.S. citizen a national ID in 2008. If you go back and read the president’s September 15 speech closely, you will notice that it isn’t just about this emergency. He is looking for expanded powers to deal with any and all emergencies, real or imagined. He has since called for the potential use of the military to quarantine entire cities, should there be outbreaks here of the much-talked-about bird flu. This would set a precedent for nothing less than martial law in America—and on the basis of a state of affairs that may never come to pass!

Warnings that the current administration is seeking dangerously expanded federal powers are often met with “so what” shrugs from “conservatives” who are quick to say that this president will not abuse such powers. It should be remembered, though, that powers granted during one administration may wind up abused by another. Indeed, it is not any particular administration that one must fear. What is to be feared is the accumulation of power.

Our Founding Fathers created constitutional government limiting federal power to a few, carefully specified functions for a specific reason: they believed
concentrations of power were dangerous. They knew that unless they were kept on a short leash, governments tended to accumulate power. Some of them warned how fragile liberty really is. "The natural progress of things," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground." They wanted to avoid the very thing that had compelled them to fight for independence against the British Empire. It did not occur to the Founding Fathers that government should institute large programs designed to provide the poor with safety nets, or involve itself in education, or in medicine, or in any of the other endeavors it has involved itself with during the intervening 200-plus years. Federal disaster relief, federal authority to quarantine cities, federal authority to grant a national ID: none of these things were contemplated by the Founding Fathers as legitimate aspects of federal authority, and nowhere in the Constitution can one find any legal authorization for Washington to involve itself in these matters.

The passage of time, though, can make men forgetful. As a nation, we have forgotten the wisdom of the Founding Fathers and rushed headlong to create a welfare state. That welfare state is part of the reason, a big part, why Hurricane Katrina caused so many people so much trouble. Now our present state of affairs is such that when a hurricane strikes a major city the result is infrastructural collapse. We are arguably worse off today than we were half a century ago despite all the advances in technology. Now, the Bush administration wants to use Katrina to justify further dangerous expansions of federal power and of the welfare state. For the good of the nation, for the good of generations to come, Congress must be convinced not to go along with this scheme.

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Improving Emergency Responsiveness with Management Science

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While the goal of OR/MS is to aid decision makers, implementation of published models occurs less frequently than one might hope. However, one area that has been significantly impacted by management science is emergency response systems. Dozens of papers on emergency service management appeared in the OR/MS literature in the 1970s alone, many of which were published in Management Science. Three of these papers won major prizes. More importantly, many of these papers led to the implementation of substantially new policies and practices, particularly in policing and firefighting. Much of this work originated in New York City, though many other cities subsequently adopted the resulting models and strategies. In this paper, we look at the context, content, and nature of the research and the factors that led to these early implementation successes. We then track the extent to which these original models are still affecting decision making in emergency response systems. We also examine the pace of development of new OR/MS models and applications in the area. Finally, we look at issues of emergency responsiveness that have emerged recently as a result of the nation's focus on terrorism and discuss the potential for future OR/MS modeling applications.