

# The katrina breakdown

Experience, Human Nature



The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina may be remarked as a very important aspect to understand the relationship between federal, state, and local governments when it comes to major catastrophe. In Katrina's case, federalism is seen as central to what was largely a government-created disaster. Numerous scientific articles are trying to offer various interpretations of what went wrong and why; however, out of all perspectives, I find Stephen Griffin's argument most persuasive.

Yes, I may agree with Martha Derthick that there were both success and failures in governmental responses to the disaster, but I also find this idea less persuasive because there were more failures than successful responses. I may agree with Marc Landy's position that federalism was put to a difficult test that required effective decisions, speed and coordination, and I agree that some citizens were not cooperating with the mandatory evacuation orders and consequently were the ones to blame. However, Griffin's examples of governmental failures show something valuable about the nature of federalism.

First of all, he proves that federalism is not simply about the fact of the existence of federal and state governments. Federalism is also about localism. Despite being dependent for their legal authority on state governments, local governments have substantial legal and political authority. Prior to Katrina, federal disaster policy had been based formally on the idea that local governments knew local conditions best. However, one of the most unusual characteristics of Hurricane Katrina was how it blasted away the entire local government infrastructure in New Orleans.

It challenged assumptions as to how the federal structure needed to operate, not just during a crisis, but also in preparing for crisis situations. It also removed the basis on which the National Response Plan was built. Second, the failure to respond to the disaster exposed one of the few real structural weaknesses in the U. S. Constitution - a mechanism to coordinate the work of local, state and national governments. While Washington had difficulty making long-range plans, coordinating its actions and political decisions, local, state and federal officials were debating over who was in charge.

The fractured division of responsibility- Governor Blanco controlled state agencies and the National Guard, Mayor Nagin directed city workers, and the head of FEMA, Mr. Brown, served as the point man for the federal government - meant no one was in charge. For example, the evacuation was delayed unnecessarily because the federal and state governments could not communicate effectively about who was supposed to provide transportation. It meant that officials were unaware that there were thousands of people without food, water, or bare necessities.

The consequences of this governmental paralysis were appalling human suffering and the humiliation of the U. S. government in the eyes of the nation and the whole world. Another part of the problem was that the scale of devastation was vast. It appeared that Katrina was beyond the capacity of the state and local governments, and it was beyond the capacity of FEMA. Federal authorities were waiting for state authorities who were supposed to combine local decisions to request resources in an emergency. However,

when local governments and communications had been wiped out, state authorities did not know what to request.

The extent of the crisis meant that state officials were unable to cope. In other words, when the crisis hit, different agencies could not communicate with one another due to different types of systems. When in fact, Katrina was a national problem and could only be solved by a national mandate. It seems that the federal system must be a certain way because it has always been that way - it is a system that the founding generation designed and thought was well-justified. Among other effects, this saves officials from having to fully confront their own responsibility for how the system is run.

In Katrina's case, for instance, there was no justification for allowing local and state authorities to fight for years over who was going to buy which communications system. They should have not fight over the idea of how the block grants needed to be distributed. Indeed, they would not have been able to fight at all were it not for the federal dollars they were receiving. Unless some institutional and constitutional lessons of Katrina are learnt, if another terroristic event, or a massive earthquake, or even another hurricane happens, we will get the same ill-coordinated response.

We need to stop our customary thinking about what federalism is and what it requires in order to prevent another disaster. The formal structure that does carry over from the eighteenth century is misleading because it has been supplemented and subtly altered by continuous institutional change. To quote Stephen Griffin: " The federal system as it exists today is our system, not that of the founding generation. " We" - generations still alive - created

it and we are continuing to change it. " In any event, if this system is ours, we are responsible for its successful operation and we can decide to change it for good and sufficient reasons.