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978-1-107-02586-8 - Disasters and the American State: How Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Public Prepare for the Unexpected

Patrick S. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

From Disaster Relief to Disaster Management

From late August 1926 through the spring of 1927, unusually heavy rain fell in the Mississippi River Valley. The rain-swollen river flowed over its banks and spilled onto the land, much of which had been stripped of natural barriers because of heavy logging. Rain overtopped some levees and burst others, and floodwaters did not recede until July 1927.¹ The water's rush was so quick and violent that it left new lakes in its wake. Some people drowned in their homes; others were found dead in the fields.

Only a year before, the Army Corps of Engineers' chief had blithely asserted that the levee system "is now in condition to prevent the destructive effects of floods."² Congress started working to tame the river in 1879, when it created the Mississippi River Commission, which worked with the Army Corps to build levees along the river's path. By the spring of 1927, the levees had failed. The river swelled over its banks, and governors of states along the river asked for federal help. Mississippi Governor Dennis Murphree sent an urgent wire to the president: "[U]nprecedented floods have created a national emergency. This territory will be water covered one to twenty feet in twenty four hours contains population 150,000 highways covered railroad operations suspended beyond capacity local and state agencies to relieve control."³

President Calvin Coolidge dispatched Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover to lead the response. On April 22, 1927, Coolidge named Hoover as chairman of a special committee of five cabinet secretaries and a Red Cross representative,

¹ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 279.

² Kevin Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar: The Executive Branch's Response to the Flood of 1927* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 25, 2005), 2; United States Army Corps of Engineers, *Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers for 1926: Mississippi River Commission* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1926), 1793; cited in Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar*, 6.

³ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 262.

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)

and Hoover spent most of the next two and a half months in the region deluged by the Mississippi River. Hoover had near-absolute authority to organize a response, and his efforts dominated national headlines.⁴ His group and the Army began spending money for relief almost immediately. Meanwhile, the president asked the public to donate \$5 million to the Red Cross to pay for relief.⁵

Hoover centralized relief policy and decentralized implementation.⁶ This was the only way he thought that an ad hoc response could meet the needs of as many as 500,000 refugees. He and the Red Cross were in contact with representatives from every relevant federal agency, but he gave relief workers in the field a great deal of autonomy. For example, Hoover gave Henry Baker, the Red Cross relief director in Memphis, the authority “to use such government equipment as necessary and charter any private property needed.”⁷ Historian John Barry reports that “a Red Cross purchasing agent conducted a nearly continuous reverse auction as he stood on a platform and shouted out supplies and quantities needed, and dozens of suppliers shouted back bids.”⁸

Few of the 105,000 people in danger along the Louisiana Cajun portion of the Mississippi River country heeded Hoover’s call to evacuate.⁹ By May 9, levees crumbled, and sandbags could not hold back the floodwaters. Yet Hoover’s organization was prepared. Thousands of trucks carrying boats, motors, experienced rescuers, and room for evacuees entered the area as the first waves of the swollen river overtopped the levees. Everyone in danger was evacuated, along with their livestock, and there were few injuries or deaths.

During the May–June 1927 flooding, rescuers saved 330 people from land that was underwater. The Red Cross housed and fed 325,554 displaced, mostly African-American people in camps for as long as four months.¹⁰ An additional 311,922 mostly white people received food and clothing outside the camps. Approximately 300,000 fled the flood-ravaged areas on their own. It is impossible to know how many people died or were buried in mud washed out to sea, but estimates range from 246 to more than 1,000.¹¹ The U.S. Weather Bureau put losses at \$355,147,000, but indirect loss estimates approached \$1 billion. The speed and scale of the recovery was unprecedented. The Red

⁴ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 262.

⁵ Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar*, 5; “Text of the President’s Flood Relief Appeal,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1927, A2.

⁶ William Holmes, “William Alexander Percy and the Bourbon Era in Mississippi Politics,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (Winter 1972–1973): 71–87; William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1942), 1–2, 18–20, 259.

⁷ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 273.

⁸ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 274.

⁹ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 282.

¹⁰ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 286.

¹¹ Barry, *Rising Tide*, 286; The American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927* (Washington, DC: Red Cross, 1929), 5.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*From Disaster Relief to Disaster Management*

3

Cross delivered \$21 million in aid, and the federal government provided approximately \$10 million in resources and personnel.¹²

Contemporaries regarded the relief efforts as a success, but historians have criticized abuses stemming from a lack of federal oversight. In the camps, relief workers abused the displaced, particularly African Americans, and forced some African-American workers to carry out relief efforts at gunpoint.¹³ Hoover formed a Colored Advisory Commission composed of influential African Americans to investigate the abuses.¹⁴

Furthermore, the government's best efforts were in response rather than in mitigation or recovery. Displaced persons whose property was destroyed found few public resources to help get them back on their feet after Hoover left, and some were dismayed at Coolidge's refusal to provide for long-term recovery.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the response to the Mississippi River flood was remarkable for the lack of disputes among federal agencies or between federal and state agencies. There was relatively little federal government involvement to begin with, compared with contemporary disaster relief, and states and localities generally welcomed federal assistance when Hoover arrived. Hoover created what one historian called an "administrative machine" with enormous centralized policy-making authority and precedents for decentralized execution.¹⁶ The widely regarded successful government response to the disaster gave Hoover, never before mentioned as a presidential contender, a national stage and catapulted him to the presidency.¹⁷

¹² Bruce Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927: A Case Study of the Political Thought of Herbert Hoover* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 170–173; Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar*, 8.

¹³ Lohof, "Herbert Hoover, Spokesman of Humane Efficiency: The Mississippi Flood of 1927," *American Quarterly* 22 (1970): 690–700, 692; Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, 365, 395; Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar*, 9, 10; Wesley A. Sturges, "The Legal Status of the Red Cross," *Michigan Law Review* 56 (1957): 1–32.

¹⁴ Walter White, "The Negro and the Flood," *The Nation* 124 (1927): 688–689; The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission Appointed to Cooperate with The American National Red Cross and the President's Committee on Relief Work in the Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927, Dr. Robert R. Moton, Chairman, May 21, 1929, available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flood/filmmore/ps_cac.html (accessed January 12, 2013).

¹⁵ "Victims of Flood Still Plead for Aid," *New York Times*, July 3, 1927, E1.

¹⁶ Lohof, "Herbert Hoover, Spokesman of Humane Efficiency: The Mississippi Flood of 1927," 692; Richard Hofstadter, "Herbert Hoover and the Crisis of American Individualism," in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage, 1948), 367–409.

¹⁷ Calvin Coolidge believed that the federal government had a responsibility to assist the public during disaster but noted in an address to Congress that the government's responsibility had limits: "The Government is not the insurer of its citizens against the hazards of the elements. We shall always have flood and drought, heat and cold, earthquake and wind, lightning and tidal wave, which are all too constant in their afflictions. The Government does not undertake to reimburse citizens for loss and damage incurred under such circumstances. It is chargeable, however, with the rebuilding of public works and the humanitarian duty of relieving its

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 might have been unprecedented, but like most disasters, it was no surprise. The river ebbs and flows according to a natural cycle, usually flooding in the spring and summer and receding to its bed by August. People who live along the river judge time not simply by calendar years, but by flood years.¹⁸ Mark Twain wrote that if the Mississippi were a “little European river it would just be a holiday job to wall it, and pile it, and dike it, and tame it down, and boss it around.... But this ain’t that kind of a river.”¹⁹

Just as the Mississippi River Flood was the seminal disaster of its age, Hurricane Katrina became the archetypical natural disaster for Americans in the twenty-first century because, paradoxically, it was so severe. How could such a devastating event occur in the modern, scientific, expertly organized United States?²⁰ The answer was that while much had changed since 1927, essential features of how the United States prepared for disasters remained startlingly similar. People built buildings and towns in low-lying areas, flood barriers were irregular and did not offer complete security, and the federal government had to work with and sometimes against state and local governments and nonprofits to mount a sufficiently large response. By the twenty-first century, moreover, it was increasingly difficult to claim that the federal government *could* coordinate disaster response like a puppet master. Instead of a Hoover-like czar with a central office, the government managed disasters through an array of loosely connected agencies responsible for insurance, shelter, transportation, and relief spending requests, usually working through states. Even the meaning of disaster had changed. At the federal level, concern about terrorism so reorganized all manner of organizations and legal authorities that there was considerable confusion in Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina struck a swath of land along the Gulf Coast from south-central Louisiana through Mississippi to Mobile, Alabama, but the complications of government involvement in disaster revealed themselves

citizens of distress.” President Calvin Coolidge, “President’s Annual Message,” as reprinted in 69 *Congressional Record* 107 (1927), and cited in Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar*, 7.

¹⁸ Pete Daniel, *Deep’n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4–5.

¹⁹ Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), 208.

²⁰ In Spike Lee’s HBO documentary about Hurricane Katrina, *After the Levees Broke*, a Louisiana resident asks why the government failed to deliver aid to New Orleans quickly when it had responded so efficiently to a tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, eight months before. The U.S. aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* took about a week to respond to the tsunami, but the differences between the two situations highlight the difference between domestic and foreign disasters and the difficulties the president has in responding to domestic disasters. Legal and organizational barriers prevent the president from sending the military to respond immediately to domestic disasters or even from appointing a Hoover-like relief-and-recovery czar. I take up these barriers in later chapters.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*From Disaster Relief to Disaster Management*

5

most starkly in New Orleans. The city is sandwiched between a river and two shallow lakes; ever since it was first settled in 1699, New Orleans has required elaborate drainage systems to make it inhabitable. For the first 200 years of its existence, people built on high ground and drained standing water into lower-lying areas and swamps. As the city developed, an elaborate system of canals and drainage devices kept the city dry.

This was a system in name only, however. It was a mix of levees, dams, and canals, each with different standards and authorities. Local levee boards used the levees as a way of creating new land to develop rather than as a tool to reduce the severity of floods.²¹ The city's first major airport was one of the earliest boondoggles built on land that otherwise might have been used as a buffer or for drainage.

At a Senate hearing investigating the causes of post-Katrina disaster, Senator Susan Collins of Maine would conclude: "There has been confusion about the basic question of who is in charge of the levees. Key officials at the Army Corps [of Engineers] and the Orleans Levee District have demonstrated this confusion by telling Committee staff one thing during interviews and then another later."²² Numerous experts had warned of New Orleans's vulnerability to a hurricane, and a training exercise in the spring of 2004 had exposed gaps in government plans for a catastrophic storm.²³ Despite the warnings, officials failed to address the shortcomings in preparation.

Katrina made landfall in Louisiana on August 29, 2005, and it became the costliest and one of the five deadliest storms in U.S. history.²⁴ More than 1,800 deaths are attributable to the storm, and estimates place damages at \$81 billion. The storm sent waves as high as 27 feet crashing against barriers, sandbags, and levees. Eventually water poured into the city. Journalists John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein described the scene:

In the space of a few hours, the storm stripped away the security blanket. Floodwalls were breached in dozens of places, their concrete and steel components bent, broken, and scattered into the backyards they had once protected. Floodgates were ripped from their hinges.... In the aftermath, only a narrow rim along the natural high ground of

²¹ Christopher Cooper and Robert Block, *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

²² Susan M. Collins, "Opening Statement, Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Hearing on 'Hurricane Katrina: Who's In Charge of the New Orleans Levees?'" Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, December 15, 2005, 11 pages. Available at: <http://hsgac.senate.gov/index.cfm?Fuseaction=Hearings.Detail&HearingID=300> (accessed October 12, 2011).

²³ There were many other warnings of impending disaster in New Orleans. In August 2000, the former deputy director of emergency preparedness in Louisiana wrote to FEMA director James Lee Witt requesting money to prepare for a hurricane. "We believe that the level of response required to sustain, protect, and rescue survivors during such post-hurricane devastation is well beyond what we conceptualize as 'the worst-case scenario,'" he wrote. See Cooper and Block, *Disaster*, 7.

²⁴ See Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the riverbank was still inhabited and functioning – the approximate boundaries of New Orleans in the mid-1800s. The city was once again open to the sea.²⁵

The storm overwhelmed government at all levels. The federal government's primary disaster agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is small relative to cabinet-level departments. During Katrina, it had only 2,500 full-time positions, of which 15–20 percent were vacant.²⁶ Because of its small size and limited authority, the agency functioned (and continues to function) as a disaster clearinghouse, receiving requests for aid from states and localities and seeking assistance from federal agencies, such as the departments of defense or transportation, with the resources and manpower to help. FEMA did not and does not own most of the resources it uses to respond to disasters.

Politicians created FEMA to avoid ad hoc disaster responses such as the government's actions in the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, but in practice the agency's performance in Katrina had characteristics of the worst of ad hoc responses: poor communication, uncertainty about resources and capacity, vague plans, and clear plans on the books that were ignored in practice. FEMA's performance was hampered by several factors. The agency was swept up in a reorganization that created the Department of Homeland Security. As a result, FEMA lost direct access to the president. Morale at FEMA sank, and the agency lost experienced professionals to retirement or to other agencies.²⁷

The government's response was not a complete failure, however. Without waiting for FEMA's direction, the Coast Guard and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries rescued stranded people from rooftops, and ad hoc local groups organized to care for the sick and elderly.²⁸ The evacuation exceeded expectations; an estimated 1–1.2 million people out of 1.4 million evacuated safely, largely because of previous experience with evacuations, repeated warnings, and the use of contraflow, a technique to reverse traffic on major highways so that all lanes flow out of the city.²⁹

The conditions for those left behind, however, were notoriously inadequate. There were no workable plans to evacuate citizens who could not or would not leave on their own. FEMA director Michael Brown eagerly told state and local officials, "If there's one thing FEMA's got, it's buses," but FEMA did not actually know where the buses were, and they did not arrive until days later.³⁰ The primary shelter, the Superdome, became uninhabitable because of storm damage, overcrowding, and failed plumbing. An alternate site, the convention

²⁵ John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein, *Path of Destruction: The Devastation of New Orleans and the Coming Age of Superstorms* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), 7–8, 246.

²⁶ U.S. Senate Committee of Homeland Security and Government Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared* (Washington, DC, 2006), 210–231.

²⁷ Cooper and Block, *Disaster*, 4–8.

²⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009).

²⁹ U.S. Senate, *Hurricane Katrina*, 243; Cooper and Block, *Disaster*, 122.

³⁰ U.S. Senate, *Hurricane Katrina*, 70; Cooper and Block, *Disaster*, 172, 184–187, 210.

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Patrick S. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*From Disaster Relief to Disaster Management*

7

center, had not been stocked with supplies. While there was blame enough to go around, the federal government bore the brunt of the criticism. The debacle led to the end of Brown's tenure at FEMA, and no Hoover figure earned renown or was propelled to higher office.³¹

The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are book-ends to a period of increasing federal government involvement in disaster. In the former, the federal government responded to pleas from state leaders with a recovery effort of unprecedented scale. In the latter, the federal government mounted a large response but drew criticism for providing too little, too late. The intervening century witnessed a social construction of disaster in which citizens (especially through voting), members of Congress, disaster management professionals, presidents, and the media inadvertently created new ideas about what counts as a disaster and how much responsibility the government bears in addressing it, all while pursuing their own various interests. This book maps changes in relationships between official and popular understandings of natural disasters, internal and external threats, and response to and mitigation of natural disasters and catastrophic attacks. Taken as a whole, it shows how ad hoc disaster response became institutionalized and bureaucratized as disaster management.

Disaster management today is full of apparent contradictions. The same plans and personnel are used to prepare for fires, floods, and hurricanes as for nuclear attacks and sometimes for terrorism. States and localities blame the federal government for lackluster disaster response, but the law generally allows the federal government to intervene after a disaster only at the request of governors. Finally, modern presidents appoint political cronies to lead disaster agencies, even though the media and the public blame presidents for poor federal government responses to disasters that can sometimes be attributed to the inexperience of the president's appointed managers.

Disasters and the American State shows how the changing social construction and contestation of disaster has increased expectations of government's responsibility for responding to and preparing for disasters, even as it shapes what counts as a disaster. The arc of social construction begins with politicians and the public debating what counts as a disaster worthy of national rather than merely local attention. Nineteenth-century Americans learned how to marshal collective resources to respond to fires (and, eventually, to mitigate or prevent them through insurance schemes and building codes), how to recognize earthquakes, and how to tame rivers and shorelines to prevent flooding (even as cities and towns expanded further into flood-prone areas). People eventually included security threats such as attack and war in their

³¹ Kosar, *Disaster Response and the Appointment of a Recovery Czar*; Daniel Schorr, "What Would Herbert Hoover Do?" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 2005, 9; Timothy Walch, "We Could Use Another Man Like Herbert Hoover," *History News Network*, October 17, 2005.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

understanding of disaster, and disaster managers juggled attention to acute fears of terrorist attacks, nuclear war, and technological accidents with attention to perennial natural disasters. Finally, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, debates in emergency management and homeland security turned on who counted as a citizen and who required special surveillance. In the realm of natural disasters, politicians and the public negotiated who deserved special assistance, given that the poor, the elderly, and other marginalized groups bore the brunt of disasters. The end result is the system we have today, in which disaster managers claim to protect the public from a range of hazards and emergencies in a system that is a patchwork of state, local, and federal authorities. Understanding disasters as the product of social construction and contestation sheds light on the paradox of how an expanded disaster state exists alongside the sober reality of dashed hopes. The arc of social construction also shows how a major expansion of federal government involvement in disaster took place through “small-‘c’ constitutionalism” – the incremental development of statutes, administrative action, and political interpretation – rather than through “big-‘C’ constitutionalism” of amendments and major legislative action.³²

THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE OVER TIME

Mark Twain wrote, “History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends.”³³ More pithily, he is often quoted as saying, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.” Like most people, Twain sensed that events occurring in sequence are connected, but he was skeptical of claims about grand laws or a priori patterns that determine those connections. The history of disaster policy follows something more concrete than the music of a rhyme but something less rigid than the necessary cause and effect implied by the social science term “mechanism.”³⁴ In the simplest terms possible, one process shapes disaster policy – social construction. Three institutions – elections, federalism, and bureaucracy – set the boundaries. Political leaders, bureaucrats, and the public have a great deal of freedom to shape what disaster policy means, but they are constrained by the institutions of U.S. government. Social construction encompasses political choices about elections

³² This book confirms the basic thesis of Eskridge and Ferejohn while adding a focus on administrative politics and the pressures that disasters impose on politicians and administrators. See William N. Eskridge, Jr. and John Ferejohn, *A Republic of Statutes: The New American Constitution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

³³ Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age* (Stillwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2007 [1873]), 199.

³⁴ Peter Hedström and Petri Ylikoski, “Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 49–67; John Gerring, “Causal Mechanisms: Yes, But ...” *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (2010): 1499–1526.

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Patrick S. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*From Disaster Relief to Disaster Management*

9

and governing institutions straight out of a U.S. government textbook.³⁵ Yet social construction also includes lower-level phenomena that shape the choices people make, from organizational routines, as in the construction of FEMA, to what is inside people's heads, including stereotypes about who is likely to be a victim and who is likely to be a perpetrator.

In the United States, government agencies are created to solve public problems: the government builds armies to provide security from enemies, and it establishes regulatory agencies in the wake of financial crisis to promote stability and consumer protection. At the same time, there remain many problems that people believe *should* be solved but nevertheless are unaddressed by coordinated federal government action. The total cost of strokes in the United States is estimated to be about \$1 billion per year, a sum so large that it could merit the term "crisis" or "disaster." The average annual flood loss in the United States over the past decade was \$2.7 billion, a total that ranks next to medium-sized hurricanes.³⁶ Either of these conditions could be addressed by coordinated government action, but responses largely remain in the hands of private actors, nongovernmental organizations, and small, ad hoc government efforts.

The social part of social construction occurs when a broad segment of society agrees on the definition of a problem. In the nineteenth century, some politicians and citizens suffering the effects of fires, floods, and earthquakes argued that the federal government should provide disaster relief. After the Civil War, the accumulated precedents of federal government intervention, once considered exceptions, overcame constitutional arguments about the limits of federal power. Federal government disaster relief became the status quo. Amid the expansion of the American state in the second half of the twentieth century, disaster policy found a home in new government agencies, often next to civil defense programs to prepare for the worst.³⁷

Often, the term "social construction" begs the question of who performs the construction – a limitation this book seeks to avoid by using historically specific analysis.³⁸ In disaster policy, who performs the construction changes over time. In the nineteenth century, members of Congress were important, arguing for more aid after disaster despite few precedents. By the twentieth century, the president and bureaucrats took center stage, establishing permanent programs to prepare for disaster. Judges decide cases that set the boundaries for the debate,

³⁵ Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram, "The Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy," *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993): 334–348.

³⁶ National Flood Insurance Program, <http://www.floodsmart.gov> (accessed May 16, 2011).

³⁷ Scholars from the fields of history and U.S. political development prefer the term "political construction," whereas "social construction" is the more common term in sociology, anthropology, critical theory, and public policy. The basic meaning of the terms is the same here.

³⁸ Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Hacking offers a criticism, largely addressed to studies of science rather than politics. An example of overly casual forms of social construction argument is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

and the public is important in demanding help during and after disaster, and in extending sympathy to victims portrayed in the media. The national electronic news media was especially important in recent years, apportioning credit and blame after disaster. The constructional structure of the United States was also important in setting the boundaries of social construction. Federalism provides for constitutionally separate powers for states and the national government, and the Constitution protects local and state spheres of influence and power, even as nationalizing rhetoric and programs grow.³⁹

Articulating a claim is not enough for social construction to occur; the claim must be sold through symbols, arguments, stories, debate, and repetition. Which claims prevail varies according to the social, political, ideological, and institutional structures of a given period. Some analysts of social construction stress the role of traditions of ideas in shaping policy. For example, the United States has a tradition of individual responsibility and limited government, which may explain its more limited welfare state when compared to European counterparts.⁴⁰ While it is true that Americans are more suspicious of state activity than citizens of many other countries, ideology does not seem to be the primary driver of disaster policy. Politicians of the left and the right in the United States have contributed to expanding the government's role in disaster, particularly in the last half-century.

Rather than focus on the role of ideology, this book casts disaster policy as the result of a political process in which different groups – politicians, bureaucrats, and the public – make claims for greater involvement.⁴¹ The book's central claim is that politicians, bureaucrats, and the public engaged in a process of social construction that increased expectations of the federal government's role in disaster policy, constrained chiefly by electoral politics, federalism, and bureaucracy. Over the course of U.S. history, however, many more actors played

³⁹ For example, federal mandates to account for race, disability, and performance have eroded state and localities' prerogatives in education policy to a greater degree than in emergency management, which arrived at a more harmonious, albeit still at times strained, relationship. See Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007). On the tensions in federalism in disaster management, see Paul Stockton and Patrick Roberts, "Findings from the Forum on Homeland Security After the Bush Administration: Next Steps in Building Unity of Effort," *Homeland Security Affairs* 4 (2008): 1–11.

⁴⁰ John Kingdon, *America the Unusual* (New York: Worth Publishers, 1999).

⁴¹ The agenda-setting literature in public policy asks similar questions, typically according to a narrower timeframe of years or decades. With a constrained timeframe, the agenda-setting literature can assume the relative stability of basic institutions of the policy process, such as federalism, congressional lawmaking, parties, and administrative processes. My project is more squarely in the U.S. political development tradition, which examines the emergence of these basic institutions and their changes over time. For examples of the agenda-setting and related problem definition literature, see Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Bryan D. Jones, *Politics and the Architecture of Choice: Bounded Rationality and Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).