

Testimony of the Hon. Tevi Troy

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Thank you for inviting me to testify here today. I am a former Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services and White House aide. During my time in government, I was involved in the response to three disasters: 9/11, Katrina, and the 2008 economic collapse. I also helped prepare for another, as I worked on the government’s pandemic response plans. My time in government, coupled with my background as a presidential historian, made me wonder how other presidents had handled disasters, which led me to write the book “Shall We Wake the President: Two Centuries of Disaster Management from the Oval Office,” a look at presidential responses to disaster, and an examination of how to handle disasters better from a policy perspective.

What I learned is that the federal government, the presidents -- and the presidency – have become increasingly more involved in dealing with disasters over the course of our history. As this involvement has increased, so has the level of expectation of the American people regarding what the federal government can do in response to disasters.

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, tracks major disaster declarations going back to 1953. Over this period, the average number of declarations per decade has grown, and declarations have been on a steady upward trajectory.

In addition, the scope of disasters covered by the government keeps increasing, and has steadily done so over the last century. Whereas weather disasters were once local or regional problems handled mainly by local first responders and the private sector, they are now national issues, and the federal government is increasingly expected to prevent them from happening, rescue people while they are happening, and make people whole after they happen. This expectation did not exist in previous eras.

Along with this increased scope of disasters covered by the government is an increase in the level of presidential involvement. We can see this progression by looking at how presidents have dealt with a variety of weather-based crises over the last 125 years. A review of five major weather-based disasters during this period—the 1889 Johnstown Flood, the 1927 Mississippi floods, 1969’s Hurricane Camille, 1992’s Hurricane Andrew, and 2005’s Hurricane Katrina—illustrates the evolution of both presidential and governmental involvement in these disasters.

Before the development of rapid communications mechanisms such as the telegraph and later the telephone, the president would not have even been aware of a natural disaster for some time. Those on the east coast of the United States, including President James Madison, were not even notified of the 1811 Missouri earthquakes until six weeks after they took place.

Even in the case of the Johnstown Flood of 1889, which occurred after the invention of the telephone and telegraph, presidential involvement, was relatively minimal. In May 1889 the area around Johnstown, Pennsylvania, was hit with extremely heavy rains. When the nearby South Fork dam broke, much of the town of Johnstown was washed away. Over 2,200 people died, and bodies were discovered as far away as Cincinnati—some 350 miles away.

On June 3, a few days after the flood, a group called the “Masonic Committee” telegraphed President Benjamin Harrison at the White House. The committee notified the president, “Situation at Johnstown appalling in extreme,” and added that “unless immediate steps are taken to remove the dead from water, every river affected by waters of Conemaugh will carry pestilence in its course.” Their specific request was worded in a strangely deferential way, given the urgency of the situation: “Can you not send a government sanitary corps to the scene without a moment’s delay?”

Harrison responded, in part: “If the governor and your State Board of Health make any call upon me in any matter in my discretion I will gladly respond...” Harrison’s message was remarkable. The United States had just suffered one of the worst days of devastation in its entire history, and the president responded to a request for help with a litany of the ways in which he was curtailed from doing so. Harrison told them that he had few medical officers, couldn’t do anything unless the governor asked (twice), and noted that he could only act on matters in his discretion. Amazingly, in reply to Harrison, the group from Johnstown wrote, “Your very satisfactory telegram received. We thought it proper to communicate with you in view of national government relation to water highways. We thank you.” Not only did presidents of the time have a better sense of the limits of their own powers, but the citizenry did as well.

Four decades later, during the great Mississippi floods of 1927, President Calvin Coolidge, famous for his taciturnity and his noninterventionist approach to governing, convened his cabinet on April 22 to discuss the situation. At that meeting, he put Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in charge of relief efforts, making him the first disaster czar in this nation’s history.

In 1969, when Hurricane Camille killed over 250 people and caused over \$1.4 billion in damages off the Gulf Coast, especially in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, President Richard Nixon and his administration became more heavily involved in disaster recovery. Nixon flew over the affected areas and also spoke out forcefully on the issue, pledging “a continuation of the interest we have already shown” from “all the departments of Government, all the agencies in Government” and from the US Congress. He sent over sixteen thousand military personnel to the affected areas. The troops brought supplies, helped clear away debris, and worked to maintain order. And Nixon sent his vice president, Spiro Agnew, to the area as well.

In August 1992, Hurricane Andrew devastated Florida and other parts of the Southeast, directly causing twenty-six deaths (with another forty indirect), \$25 billion in damages, and destroying over twenty-five thousand homes. In this case, there was an immediate sense that it was the federal government that was now responsible for the recovery. FEMA had been created, in 1979, and the government was expected not only to forecast the weather but also to lead recovery efforts. As a result, disaster recovery became a metric for judging the effectiveness of a president, a development with significant political implications. By August 28, only four days after the storm

made landfall, the *New York Times* ran a headline: “Bush Sending Army to Florida Amid Criticism of Relief Effort.” In response, on August 28, Bush held a news conference in which he detailed federal efforts to address the situation. According to Bush, the resources being directed to the affected area included seven thousand troops, with another one thousand marines coming; two tent cities to accommodate five thousand people; 400,000 meals; and twenty mobile kitchen trailers. As the president said, in words that would have been shocking to Harrison and disturbing to Coolidge, “The Federal Government has a leading role in the humanitarian relief.”

There is no need to go over Hurricane Katrina in detail here. That storm, in August 2005, killed over 1,800 people and caused over \$148 billion in damages. The storm and attendant floods made 600,000 families homeless, left 3 million homes without power, and damaged or destroyed 1.2 million homes. It painted an indelible picture of government helplessness, as images of the suffering Gulf Staters went around the country and around the world.

With this background in mind, we can now look at the Federal response to 2017’s Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Maria. Let’s look at Harvey first. To my mind, having lived through the trauma of the government’s ineffective response to Katrina, I was encouraged by what the federal government and particularly FEMA, appeared to have learned in the intervening twelve years.

The federal government for the most part received praise for its effective handling of the crisis. Washington’s disaster authorities appeared to be in sync with the state on roles and responsibilities; FEMA deployed resources as Harvey approached; and the government response as a whole appeared well coordinated. In sum, FEMA worked well with state and local officials, predeployed key resources and personnel to get ready, and seemed to have learned the lessons from previous response failures such as 2005’s Hurricane Katrina.

FEMA appeared to have learned from past failures and adapted with new approaches to improve its performance over time. One recurring challenge has been identifying exactly how to get the resources and rescuers where they need to go. Social media has emerged as one solution, and FEMA had people tracking Facebook and twitter feeds to identify people and places in need of assistance. In addition, FEMA operations centers improved vastly from when President George H.W. Bush visited one after the 1989 San Francisco earthquake. C-Span has great footage of this visit, and the change in what an operations center looks like is remarkable. Back then, a few rotary phones and a white board were the main tools used to coordinate response activities. Now, thanks to continued integration of new technologies, operations centers are high tech multi-screen environments giving emergency operations managers far more real-time information regarding on-the-ground developments than were available just half a generation ago during Katrina in 2005.

Another improvement in the disaster response model that showed up during Harvey was in the integration of volunteers who wanted to help. Federal, state and local government officials understand they do not have enough vessels or personnel to save everyone whose life is imperiled. Houston police department’s dive team, which did heroic work during Harvey, has only 16 trained officers. These limitations make assistance from outside groups like the Cajun Navy – volunteer boaters who go out and rescue individuals in floods – invaluable. In addition, professional volunteer assistance is not just about the Red Cross anymore. FEMA’s website lists

about a dozen “professional” volunteer organizations that FEMA cooperates with – VOADs in FEMA’s bureaucratise – during disasters.

Given these improvements, the question arises of why the Harvey response was such a success, and the Maria response, just a short time later, was seen as subpar. One of the primary reasons for this disparity is the added challenge of disaster response off the mainland. Getting resources to an island is just that much more difficult than using the interstate highway system to move people and supplies. As a FEMA official told me, “To say it’s logistically challenging is an understatement.”

This logistical challenge was compounded by the devastation on the island. The first responders in Puerto Rico were also the victims, which means that many were unavailable to the response effort. The result is that FEMA faced both its normal job of transporting supplies but also the typically local responsibility of distributing them, which is not its expertise.

In addition, it is harder for the residents themselves to evacuate when planes and boats are the only avenues of escape. We saw the lines of cars on interstate 95 headed north from Florida before Irma. Such an escape route was not available to Puerto Ricans or Virgin Islanders. At the same time, this hurdle made it that much harder for the Good Samaritans to assist. Dallas’ “Texas Kosher BBQ” brought badly needed kosher food to observant Jewish Houstonians who had been subsisting on Chex Mix. Dallas is 239 miles from Houston. Puerto Rico is only 110 miles across, and the Virgin Islands even smaller, limiting the geographic range from which help could come.

A second reason for the difference in responses stems from the challenge of coping with serial disasters. As we saw with Harvey and Irma, post-Katrina reforms in 2006 improved FEMA’s “surge capacity,” its ability to handle more than one disaster in a row or at a time. But Texas and Florida happen to be two of the best prepared emergency response states, which made the job easier. Puerto Rico is less well-equipped. Furthermore, FEMA, like any government agency, has limited resources. Its appropriations run out quickly in one disaster, let alone three, requiring a less than nimble Congress to vote to provide disaster funding. And FEMA personnel, who do heroic work, are only human and subject to exhaustion when faced with a month of constant deployments and redeployments.

Third, one of the critical challenges in the hours and days following Maria’s landfall was a lack of situational awareness. Because Maria was so powerful when it made landfall, it destroyed the existing power and communications infrastructure on the island. This put FEMA at an immediate disadvantage in its attempts to respond to the crisis. I mentioned needed and welcome improvements in the FEMA operations centers earlier. In the Maria situation, those operations centers were less effective without power and communications connectivity.

Finally, and this is outside of FEMA’s purview, is the issue of presidential focus. The White House seemed ready for Harvey, but less ready to cope with a spate of continuing hurricanes for an entire month. The lesson here is that presidential leadership is about continued effort in the face of ongoing challenges. As President George W. Bush learned with Katrina, you can do a

great job in dealing with weather disasters for four years – as Bush did – but the one you falter on is the one for which you'll be remembered.

With this background in mind, I would like to make some suggestions for how to improve our hurricane response going forward. As much as we laud our technological progress – for good reason -- the fact remains that there is little that government officials can do in the short term, and probably even in the long term, to prevent catastrophic weather events from taking place. Government officials, up to and including the president, also cannot minimize the physical impact of a storm, earthquake, or flood, although government efforts can and do alleviate suffering and help rebuild in the wake of such an event.

As a result, president and federal government need to ensure that they do not overpromise with respect to preventing and responding to hurricanes. Presidents must also make sure that their administrations meet the properly calibrated promises they issue. Even this is not easy. The federal government has evolved into a massive and behemoth bureaucracy with two million employees, a number impossible for anyone to control. President Obama once explained this point by recounting some advice he had received from Defense Secretary Robert Gates: “Somewhere, somehow, somebody in the federal government is screwing up.” The point here is not to excuse incompetence. However, presidents know that they are held responsible for the actions of the government as a whole. This means that whatever disaster promises they make, they had better make sure their government is keeping them, regardless of the fact that somebody, somewhere, somehow is screwing up.

Nothing can ensure the complete absence of screw-ups. But smart leadership can make sure that key offices are prepared to deal with crises. Since weather is the one thing presidents know they are going to face, they should make sure that they and their top officials are ready when the bad weather hits. Senior officials tend not to like to drill or practice for potential crises. There always seem to be more pressing priorities. But given the certainty of weather-based events, presidents should make sure that they and their senior officials engage in preparation drills early on in their administrations, and that they continue to do so periodically.

Within the realm of realistic expectations, the president also needs to develop realistic budget numbers. The government spends a staggering amount of money on disasters, but it does not budget properly for that spending. According to the Center for American Progress's Daniel J. Weiss and Jackie Weidman, the US government spent \$136 billion on disaster relief between 2011 and 2013, approximately \$400 per US household. This spending takes place among nineteen different departments, expected agencies like the Department of Homeland Security, but also unexpected ones like the Smithsonian Institution and NASA. The Department of Agriculture alone has nineteen disaster-related programs.

Another problem is the degree to which disaster funding is improvised. The government does have an annual disaster contingency fund of about \$29 billion. But this pales next to the \$136 billion that the government actually spent from 2011 to 2013. This improvisational approach harms attempts at responsible budgeting, but it also harms the affected communities as well. As the Rockefeller Institute's James W. Fossett has argued, “The federal government has no single expedited process for allocating and spending relief money.” What this means is that emergency

appropriations get directed to federal agencies, and localities must then petition the individual agencies to get specific types of assistance for their communities. This approach imposes additional burdens on the communities seeking relief. It is also inefficient. Each office, each agency, each bureaucracy through which disaster money is directed, spends money in the process of directing said funds. At the end of the process, less money ends up in the hands of the victims than the taxpayers directed on their behalf.

These suggestions should in no way take away from the tremendous job that our disaster response officials do. In my experience in disaster response, I have never seen decisions made based on the background or the socioeconomic status of the victims. The professionals in the U.S. government who deal with disaster are top notch, and they are incredibly dedicated and skilled professionals. No one can prevent disasters or eliminate their consequences, but we should appreciate their good work, and consistently strive to make improvement that will make their jobs easier.

Thank you for your attention and for inviting me to testify here today.