

KeyOpinion

The Fickle Finger of FEMA

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Contributing Columnist

When a problem merits careful execution, But is assigned to bureaucratic backs, It should come as no surprise when the solution Creates a void and falls between the cracks.

FEMA — the Federal Emergency Management Agency — is an excellent concept.

Ideally, the principal raison d'être for government in a democracy is to do for citizens what they cannot realistically be expected to do for themselves. Hence, the existence of police and fire departments on a local level, and armies and navies maintained by national governments.

Catastrophes when they occur, whether natural or man made, receive immediate attention from local first responders, but, as recent events so aptly demonstrate, require assistance to a degree that can only be supplied by the Federal Government.

FEMA's mandate is "to prepare the nation for all hazards and manage federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident."

A noble purpose, but as serial killer Ted Bundy might have said: the devil, my dear, lies in the execution.

And therein lies the rub. After Hurricane Katrina's massive blow at the City of New Orleans and environs, FEMA's execution of its statutory duties was more evocative of a hanging victim turning slowly in the wind, than a swiftly competent lethal injection.

There is no point in rehashing the agonizingly inefficient performance of that government agency, which at the time was headed by an appointee who owed his position to political party loyalty and the size of his monetary contributions to election campaigns.

As a matter of fact, the gentleman's only preceding managerial experience was as a commissioner of the International Arabian Horse Association, which may explain why his performance as Director of FEMA was

akin to riding a horse madly off in all directions.

Ultimately, he was unhorsed, but direction of that agency is now solely vested in Michael Chertoff, the head of Homeland Security. His prior experience was as a lawyer and judge, but no significant expertise has been shown in planning for and remedying the aftermaths of catastrophic events.

And today, two years after the event, New Orleans remains blighted and crippled, with totally inadequate Federal aid.

Moreover, billions of dollars have been appropriated by Congress for security against terrorist threats, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency has demonstrated its alleged "competence" by cutting back on funds for our largest cities and ports. It has instead reallocated millions to small inland cities that are politically significant to the party in power, but of no interest to the followers of Osama Bin Ladin.

Of greater consequence to the readers of this column is the fact that FEMA has nearly dictatorial powers covering construction, reconstruction and reimbursement for necessary expenditures occasioned by a hurricane, flood, or other catastrophe.

By "imperial decree," the agency has indicated that it will reimburse municipalities for the initial costs of clearing debris from public roads, but not for roadways behind the gates of gated communities or streets that may otherwise be considered "private."

This attitude flies in the face of the concept of governmental responsibility for public safety.

In New England, for example, government at local and state levels places emphasis on accessibility to structures in case of fire or medical emergency, and therefore permits snow plows to clear roads whether they be public or private. The theory is if the mail trucks are

permitted to go through, the way must also be clear for ambulances and fire engines.

There's been no snow in Florida of late, but the concept should be the same. If hurricanes, floods or major windstorms block passage, official vehicles need to have access.

What gives FEMA and the appointees who run it the right to decide who will be helped and/or reimbursed for the cost of providing access?

If it is a question of expense to the taxpayer, the irony is obvious. The people who choose to live behind gates not only have the same tax burden as everyone else, but also save the general community some of the costs of providing protection from crime and repairing and maintaining the condition of their own roads.

Fairness, common sense and equity would seem to dictate that all citizens be treated equally in the event of a major disaster.

Just as police and fire protection are provided to everyone, regardless of location, that same consideration should be extended by the managers of FEMA.

In the meantime, the leadership of some communities, such as Longboat Key, have taken the "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" initiative, and voted to clear the main thoroughfares in a first sweep, followed by secondary clearing on all streets, regardless of category.

The question of help and/or later reimbursement from the mavens in Washington will come later, when the waters have receded and the winds died down.

*FEMA is a good idea —
A good idea on paper,
But often its results may seem
To be just so much vapor.*

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