

Reaction Paper Melissa Scudo

The readings this week examine the role of the federal government in disaster mitigation and recovery and the effects of the politicization of natural events. Before 1950, responsibility for response, rescue and reconstruction from natural events was largely localized. Financial assistance and other support to rebuild after events were shouldered by private citizens and local communities, as the federal government was reluctant to become involved in what was considered interference with matters pertaining to "private property." *Disasters After 1950* outlines the transition of this policy of "non-involvement," most notably after the sinking of the Titanic and the Triangle Shirt Waist factory in New York City. These events focused attention on class dimensions of response to natural disasters. While individuals with wealth and influence had the resources to respond to natural events, there were no incentives in the private economy to protect and support everyone (particularly the poor and marginalized). From this arose focused attention on the need for public intervention to provide equal protection.

Shouldering the Burden addresses the dichotomy of increased government intervention with disaster relief; its purpose to provide equal protection to citizens affected by disasters and the argument that (excessive?) federal assistance through subsidy programs actually contributes inadvertently to the disaster losses it is intended to relieve. I found the chronology of federal assistance interesting; how depression and war contributed to an environment that fostered a more paternalistic government under FDR that engaged in public works programs (among other efforts) that expanded development into hazardous areas - increasing losses, and eventually, increasing government investment into providing relief to affected areas.

The article suggests that federal grants to supplement losses incurred as a result of disasters actually serve to increase risky behavior, such as the development of hazardous areas, particularly near coastlines. Why worry about your house collapsing into the ocean when the federal government or insurance agencies will compensate you for your loss? What's the incentive NOT to build in hazardous areas?

Another interesting point in the article is the role of politics with respect to natural events. The pressure that presidents and politicians face in responding publicly to natural events causing widespread damage is influenced in no small part by sensationalism generated by the media. What is the appropriate level of support that the government should provide? The numbers included in the article suggest that millions of dollars are allocated toward responding to disasters and that perhaps not enough of this assistance is dedicated or reserved for preparedness and mitigation efforts. Are more incentives, or perhaps regulations, necessary to increase mitigation efforts at the local level? The reading suggests that there are too few incentives to reduce vulnerability to future losses caused by natural events.