

REACTION PAPER

Platt - "Introduction: Disasters Before 1950"

Before 1950, disaster assistance was viewed as the moral responsibility of neighbors, churches and communities but not the federal government. The doctrine of laissez faire stifled attempts to regulate corporations or building practices even when human negligence and avarice was manifest. For instance, after the dam failure in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, the government at all levels was silent despite widespread public outcry in the press. The Congress provided no disaster relief and did nothing to ensure that such a disaster would not be repeated there or elsewhere. The sinking of the Titanic also called widespread attention in industrialized nations to the hazards of allowing private corporations excessive latitude where human life is at stake. While the federal government assumed responsibility to provide for disaster relief projects, it remained aloof from providing direct assistance. The response phase of a disaster was much smaller, subsumed by the preparedness and mitigation activities before a disaster, as well as the extensive recovery phase after a disaster.

Platt - "Shouldering the Burden"

If state and local governments believe that the federal government will meet the needs in every disaster, they have less incentive to spend scarce state and local resources on disaster preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery. This not only raises the costs of disasters to federal taxpayers, but also to the society as people are encouraged to take risks they think they will not have to pay for. Also if the government adopts a policy of bailing out those who lose the bet they place when they pass up an earthquake insurance, it unintentionally encourages people to engage in behaviors of procuring free disaster insurances from the government.

In recent years, the number of presidential declarations of "major disasters" has skyrocketed. Such declarations make stricken areas eligible for federal emergency relief funds that greatly reduce their costs. But is federalizing the costs of disasters helping to lighten the overall burden of disasters or is it making matters worse? Does it remove incentives for individuals and local communities to take measures to protect themselves? Are people more likely to invest in property in hazardous locations in the belief that, if worse comes to worst, the federal government will bail them out?