Book Review

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By Claire Rubin


In *Emergency Management: The American Experience*, Claire Rubin brings together a team of highly esteemed scholars and practitioners to examine the history of emergency management in the United States, while addressing several important questions regarding the growth and appropriate role of the federal government in responding to disaster events. This second edition builds upon the original text – first published in 2007 – and retains not only its critical perspective and analytical framework, but also its underlying purpose: “to illuminate changes in public policies, administration, and organizations in response to major disasters and to identify the implications of those changes for emergency management today” (p. 3). In Chapter 1, Rubin lays the groundwork for the study by advancing the hypothesis that changes in emergency management policies, processes, and authorities are essentially driven by focusing events, which capture policy attention by exposing critical failures in the existing administrative and/or policy systems. In fact, as Rubin denotes, “virtually all major federal laws, executive directives, programs, policies, organizational changes, and response systems have resulted from major and catastrophic disasters” (pp. 6–7).

In Chapter 2, David Butler examines the dramatic impacts of several focusing events in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Butler, this period was marked by ad hoc and reactive policy responses, all of which were implemented under a veil of limited federal involvement. Indeed, despite the frequency of event-specific legislation, “disaster assistance was considered the responsibility of the states or, more often, local governments, charities, and other social institutions such as churches” (p. 14). The period was also defined by a general ontological view of disasters as “unavoidable ‘acts of God,’ which, by definition, transcend the power of government to prevent,” thereby reinforcing public indifference and neglect (p. 14). In turn, Butler explores the negative consequences of hubris, denial, and complacency in the storm-related devastation of
Galveston in 1900; the compounding problems of poor construction, inappropriate response operations, and social vulnerability in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906; and the general lack of intergovernmental and private-sector capacity to deal with the escalating demands of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918. Butler closes the chapter with a positive reference to the mitigation outcomes of the Long Beach earthquake of 1922, which not only enhanced the regulation and oversight of building construction in California, but also “laid the groundwork for national awareness and federal legislation many years later” (p. 45).

In Chapter 3, Butler continues his discussion of focusing events in the early twentieth century, while further tracing the expanding role of the federal government in responding to both natural and technological disasters. The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, in particular, solidified the national significance of catastrophic flooding and exposed the limitations of the federal government’s “levees only” policy. As a result, the federal government expanded the breadth of its approach and adopted “a national policy of flood control” (p. 57), which set a precedent for direct, comprehensive, and sustained federal involvement in local affairs. The response to the 1930s Dust Bowl event yielded similar, if not more pervasive federal intervention, as it became clear that aggressive capitalism had pushed agricultural production into a vicious cycle of destructive land use across the nation. Beyond this, the Texas City Explosions of 1947 further highlighted the problems of human complacency, particularly in dealing with complex systems, and introduced the realities of public liability for technological disasters. Taken together, it is clear that the events of this period not only softened the “deep-rooted, hard line attitudes of free enterprise, individualism, and the passive role of government” (p. 65), but also prompted an alternative perspective on the disaster problem, one that revolves around social origins of disasters and the need for more long-term, proactive responses.

In Chapter 4, Keith Bea traces the progressive development of federal disaster policy, while critically examining the efficacy of intergovernmental disaster relief operations during the civil defense era. As Bea states, the Federal Disaster Relief of 1950 provided the first “ongoing (permanent) authority for federal action” (p. 86). Moreover, the act “shifted responsibility [for disaster relief] from Capitol Hill to the White House” and “committed the federal government to provide specific types of limited assistance following disaster, as well as certain help before disasters occurred” (p. 86). The establishment of a permanent, overriding policy structure for disaster relief provided stark contrast to the reactive policy measures of the past, and essentially paved the way for further legislative expansion. In fact, the need for such expansion was realized and consequently brought to fruition in the devastating wake of several focusing events in the 1960s and 1970s, which included the Alaskan Earthquake of 1964, Hurricane
Betsy in 1965, and Hurricane Agnes in 1972. In addition to changing legislation, the structure of emergency management also underwent dramatic transformations during this period. The frequency of disaster relief operations, coupled with the perceived illegitimacy of existing civil defense organizations, gave rise to a “dual-use” policy, which helped open civil defense funding and support opportunities to emergency management. The system continued to suffer from the problems of fragmented authority and poor coordination. Such conditions led to the development of a “comprehensive approach to emergency preparedness planning” (p. 106) and prompted President Carter to consolidate all federal emergency management functions within the newly created Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1978.

In Chapter 5, Richard Sylves explores the development of FEMA, as well as the far-reaching consequences of the various political responses to major disasters that occurred between 1979 and 2001. Throughout this period, federal involvement in emergency management continued to expand in the wake of focusing events. As Sylves indicates, “Earthquakes, including those in northern (1989) and southern (1992) California; several hurricanes; and the Great Midwest Flood of 1993 all generated new or amended federal, state, and local laws”, as the cumulative experiences of these events “constantly underscored the need for improvement in disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery” (p. 142). For instance, the Loma Prieta earthquake “raised issues of mitigation and underscored the importance of protecting bridges, elevated roads, and other infrastructure” (p. 147), while Hurricane Andrew exposed the devastating consequences of poor construction and inadequate code enforcement. Beyond such event-specific issues, however, the period was also marked by a paradigmatic shift toward more proactive and holistic management perspectives. Indeed, FEMA had become adept at building intergovernmental relationships and generating broad-based support on a national scale, to include direct presidential support under the Clinton Administration. These accomplishments were further bolstered by major advances in disaster science and information technology, as well as a renewed focus on hazard mitigation, which was exemplified by the passage of the Disaster Mitigation Act in 2000.

In Chapter 6, John Harrald details the intergovernmental response to the 2001 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, and then critically examines the intended and unintended consequences of the federal government’s reaction to the event. Although the response effort was deemed adequate, the federal government immediately moved to reevaluate its structure for managing extreme events and establish “a true national response system that [could] integrate the efforts of local, state, and federal civilian and military forces” (p. 173). These efforts led to the formation of the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as
well as a massive reorganization of federal response agencies, including FEMA, within its organizational structure. Moreover, the operational framework of the Federal Response Plan was replaced by National Response Plan (NRP) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) – with the former serving to “integrate federal resources, knowledge, and ability” and the latter providing “the doctrine to enable command and control, align structures, define terminology, and specify operational protocols” (p. 178). According to Harrald, “The implicit assumption was that development of strategy and doctrine at the higher levels of government in Washington, combined with local funding and training, would result in improved preparedness and response capability” (p. 179). Nonetheless, in addition to significantly weakening FEMA’s capabilities, these changes were primarily directed toward preventing and preparing for terrorist attacks and, therefore, resulted in “[m]inimal efforts to ensure that the nation had the capacity and capability to respond to catastrophic natural disaster” (p. 186). Moreover, the restructuring of the national response system essentially supplanted the open network structure of emergency management with the more rigid and potentially closed systems structure of NIMS, which not only increased bureaucratic layering and organizational confusion, but also reduced system agility, creativity, and flexibility.

In Chapter 7, Melanie Gall and Susan Cutter expand upon Harrald’s analysis of the post-9/11 environment, while further exploring the systemic problems of diminished capacity and increasing vulnerability within the context of the 2005 hurricane season. The unrelenting events of this period, which became the most active and costly on record, dealt a devastating blow to the newly formed homeland security structure. As Gall and Cutter indicate, the 2005 hurricane season produced twenty-seven named storms, fifteen of which developed into hurricanes, including three Category 5 hurricanes – Katrina, Rita, and Wilma – that “destroyed lives, property, and [ultimately] trust in the national emergency response system” (pp. 192–193). The catastrophic impacts of Hurricane Katrina, in particular, quickly overwhelmed the intergovernmental response effort and consequently exposed the limitations and maladaptive outcomes of the homeland security era. Without doubt, the event separated reality from rhetoric, as the organizational and operational complexities of the reorganization served to significantly weaken federal leadership and response capacity. The subjugation of FEMA (and its core elements) within the DHS structure, along with the failed implementation of the NFP and NIMS/ICS were specifically identified as contributing factors in this regard. Moreover, as Gall and Cutter argue, the problems of Katrina were further compounded by the scant attention given to local hazard mitigation, as well as the deficient capacity for vulnerability reduction and recovery planning at all governmental levels. Although some of these issues
were addressed by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, it is clear that problems remain, as no major improvements have been made “in the nation’s critical infrastructure, hazard mitigation, environmental regulation, catastrophic planning, or medical preparedness” (p. 209).

In Chapter 8, Harrald explores the complexities of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and its impacts on the revitalized, post-Katrina emergency management system. The oil spill presented response leaders with a number of immediate challenges, to include “the uniqueness of the initiating event itself” and “unprecedented issues of scale” (p. 215). In fact, as Harrald illustrates, “Response leaders were faced with both the daunting technological task of stopping the spill and minimizing its impact, and the managerial challenge of creating and leading the largest oil spill response in history” (p. 215). Nonetheless, as the event transpired, these issues were further exacerbated by mounting socio-political pressure and glaring, organizational conflicts between National Contingency Plan and NRF doctrine. The politicization of the event prompted many state and local officials to act independently and manipulate the response through mass media exposure. Such behavior led many officials to reject expert advice and, in turn, exert pressure on response leaders to allocate resources on the basis of political, rather than strategic or tactical needs. Beyond this, the doctrinal conflicts between the NCP and NRF caused extensive confusion among the responding agencies. The NCP mandates a “top-down” organizational structure that consolidates power around the federal government, while the NRF relies on a “bottom-up” approach to empower lower-level governments and provide federal support. The inability to reconcile these conflicts meant the federal and lower-level governments often worked in a state of opposition, rather than cohesion. As Harrald concludes, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill is “another reminder not only that low probability/high consequence events will occur but also that the uniqueness and unpredictability of these events will continue to confound our ability to plan and prepare” (p. 233).

In Chapters 9 and 10, Patrick Roberts, Robert Ward, and Gary Wamsley retrace the historical development of emergency management in the United States, and then move to expand their analysis in the broader context of public policy and administration. The “policy streams” model and the theory of “punctuated equilibrium” are utilized to explain the reactive and cyclical nature of emergency management policy development. The authors also demonstrate how “government decision-makers often pursue political agendas in accordance with the assumption that government agencies can and will be able to use rational methods of management” (p. 252). However, it is shown how such pursuits continually falter in the wake of politics and problem complexity. Emergency managers must acknowledge the limitations of “rational” management and develop
a broader understanding of “the scientific, organizational, and political factors that influence the system” (p. 257). The authors conclude the chapter with a discussion on the synergistic prospects of emergency management networks, as well as the need to enhance pre-disaster mitigation, professionalism, and interdisciplinary disaster research.

In the wake of increasing vulnerability and disaster risk, *Emergency Management: The American Experience* provides an in-depth and thought provoking assessment of emergency management history in the United States. The critical approach and guiding analytical framework of the text is both effective and genuinely informative, as each chapter explores the subject matter with rich context and deep perspective, thereby allowing the reader to better comprehend the underlying dynamics and complexities of emergency management. Moreover, by centering their analysis on focusing events, the authors are able to flesh out “root causes” and other tacit social-political processes that ultimately drive the profession's development (both good and bad), while offering numerous lessons and recommendations for future advancement. As Rubin argues, “Critical thinking and decision-making skills need to be enhanced, and more attention must be given to strategic thinking and foresight. The goals must be to anticipate rather than react to future disasters, and to develop the leadership skills, talents, and training for future emergency managers” (p. 11). Her vision does not constitute a simple wish list for the future; rather, it espouses fundamental needs that cannot be overstated, and the text provides a solid foundation for this development. Without doubt, it will serve as a vital resource for any practitioner or academic involved in homeland security, emergency management, and/or policy science.

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