



CNN.com

PRINT THIS
Powered by **Clickability**

Another disaster: Conservatives' attack on FEMA

(CNN) -- Three months ago, Republicans in the House of Representatives tried to slash 2012 spending for the Federal Emergency Management Agency by 55% compared with 2011 spending levels, 70% compared with the 2010 budget. Thankfully, Senate Democrats avoided the most extreme cuts to FEMA. But since then, the United States has been pelted by several major disasters and FEMA is almost out of money.

Nonetheless, Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia -- whose own district was the much-damaged epicenter of a severe earthquake last week -- said [he would not increase FEMA's funding](#) until spending is cut elsewhere.

We shouldn't be surprised. Republicans also said they wouldn't do anything to help the economy and the middle class unless spending was cut from the very poor and elderly: proposing cuts to food stamps and Medicare. It's as if millions of Americans are drowning while Republicans stand on the shore, hoarding life preservers by the armfuls. You can have one in a natural disaster or get one later if you're old or unemployed -- but you can't have both.

Of course, many conservatives want to get rid of life preservers altogether. This weekend, Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul made waves by saying [FEMA should be destroyed](#). In its policy manifesto for members of Congress, the libertarian Cato Institute urged that FEMA "should be abolished," saying that "by using taxpayer dollars to provide disaster relief and subsidized insurance, FEMA itself encourages Americans to build in disaster-prone areas and makes the rest of us pick up the tab for those risky decisions." Indeed, when the small town of Mineral, Virginia, built itself over a fault line in 1890, it should have foreseen last week's earthquake. And don't even get me started on New York City brazenly popping up in the path of a hurricane.

Conservatives hate FEMA precisely because it represents the ideals of government at its best. Not always the implementation -- the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exposed the dire need for reforms in FEMA's chain of command. But the spirit -- that, as Thomas Jefferson put it, through our government, we "unite in common efforts for the common good."

Just as up and down the East Coast this weekend, good neighbors helped those who couldn't help themselves, in these crisis moments, good government helps entire neighborhoods, towns and even cities that can't help themselves.

Hurricane Irene tragically claimed at least 21 lives, but fortunately the damage overall was less than anticipated. Still, according to the Los Angeles Times, total uninsured losses could be as high as \$4 billion. At a time when cities and states are already strapped and our fragile economy needs every small business and working family at full speed, it's the job of our federal government to help. Yes, even if that means taxing the very rich or borrowing more money to do so.

Funnily enough, now some Republicans in Congress are demanding FEMA's budget be increased. The very same party that tried to slash FEMA's budget by more than half [is now accusing President Obama](#) of "purposefully and irresponsibly underfunding" disaster relief and "putting families and communities who have suffered from terrible disasters on the back burner."

The Republican-led House Appropriations Committee which earlier this year gouged FEMA's budget has [issued a press release](#) trying to blame Democrats and the president for cuts to disaster relief aid. Someone had better call the congressional doctor and check the Capitol building for chunks of falling debris.

This dramatic about-face perfectly captures conservative opportunism against government: Beat it to the ground and then, when government is obviously needed, blame liberals for not helping it get up. Coming from a political party that has vowed to shrink government to the size where it can be drowned in a bathtub, we should be skeptical when Republicans pretend they're the ones resuscitating our common good.

Governors from both sides of the aisle are praising FEMA in the wake of Irene. "FEMA has been very responsive," said New Jersey's Republican Gov. Chris Christie. Maryland's Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, also praised FEMA and drew contrasts with a few years ago when, under President George W. Bush, FEMA was undermined and ineffective.

The fact is, government works. FEMA, when it's adequately funded and staffed by competent professionals, is not an exception but the rule. It's one of millions of examples of how, through government, we unite in common efforts for the common good.

As Irene approached my neighborhood in New York, people were helping evacuees get safely to shelters, carrying gallons of water up each other's stairs and generally keeping each other entertained in the insanely long lines at grocery stores. In our national community, government was standing by to offer its helping hand if needed --- a hand conservatives are trying to sever, when they're not busy ceremoniously shaking it.

The opinions in this commentary are solely those of Sally Kohn.

Find this article at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/08/29/kohn.conservatives.fema/index.html?iref=allsearch>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2008 Cable News Network