

Don't Depend on FEMA to Save Us From Global-Warming's Armageddon

Barbara G. Ellis

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Americans noticing the increasingly intense natural disasters in this country—extreme heat waves, forest fires, hurricanes, tornados, floods, water shortages, volcanoes, and earthquakes—have to be quietly nervous or blocking news about what may happen in their backyards.

In my backyard—Portland OR—a climate-change brouhaha has arisen between some 1,000 irate residents behind a 30-foot high levee protecting the city from the Columbia river. This \$158 million federal plan would shore it up, topped by a three-foot retaining wall, and replacement of worn-out pumps. (Local expense: \$53,720.)

Meantime in the South's front yards, historic rains have been drenching 10 million people in February with record-setting floods in Tennessee and particularly along the Pearl River which crested so far at nearly 37 feet as it swept through downtown Jackson, Mississippi's capitol.

As a result, perhaps the most alarming thought of many Americans today is that survival from global warming's massive weather disasters currently depends upon the weak reed of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) for preparedness, relief, rescue—and flood insurance claims.

Its most recent major failures have been in U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. True or not, the 41-year-old agency was blamed for a sub-par performance in handling the island's continuing quakes, aftershocks, and tremors. Many residents have neither forgotten nor forgiven FEMA's ongoing and negligent role in 2017's Hurricane Maria. It was topped by President Donald Trump's visit to toss them paper towels and withhold most of the \$18 billion Congress voted for disaster relief (only \$1.5 billion and \$1.8 billion were issued to fix the electric grid system). Suspensions for such post-tragedy viciousness (an estimated 5,000 – 7,000 deaths) ranged from Trump's racial bigotry, his aversion to hearing Spanish, and general stinginess to vengeance for Puerto Ricans giving him only 5,474 votes, but Democrats (Clinton's 54,839, Sanders' 33,958) in the 2016 primary .

The quakes began on December 28 and continued from 2,200 swarms of magnitude 2.5 to 4.2 quakes after January 7's M 6.4 quake—once again knocking out the entire power supply — and an M 5 February 4. On February 20 alone it was 51 quakes with a median of M 3.

By March's end thousands may still be homeless. Many who aren't are camped close to wrecked homes to put a pair of feet quickly inside when FEMA staffers turn up because to get mitigation funds, the owner has to be actually "in" the house.

Meanwhile, at FEMA's Washington headquarters, its latest administrator Pete Gaynor issued statements about being in "constant communication and coordination" with territorial Governor Wanda Vázquez and had dispatched two teams (Urban Search and Rescue, Incident Support Base) to the island. Yet in June's House hearing on upcoming hurricane preparedness, Gaynor admitted FEMA was "probably short a few thousand employees" (11,352 full-timers in 2020).

His equally new coordinating officer on the island, Alex Amparo, seemed to be mostly directing heavy traffic pouring in to provide outside aid from the Armed Services, private organizations, and Puerto Ricans from the northern half of the island.

At least five familiar relief agencies—Red Cross to Salvation Army—also arrived almost immediately. The international nonprofit All Hands and Hearts' World Central Kitchen served 10,000 meals per day. Mainland donors of money and supplies were told to contact Puerto Rico-based relief groups before sending them off.

For the earthquakes, a vanguard of 50 U.S. Air Force reservists—from California, New Mexico, Ohio—erected tents for operational bases at five southwestern coastal counties. The Services were to distribute supplies—food, tents, cots, blankets, medical care, equipment, building materials, and vehicles—from Stateside stockpiles. The Corps of Engineers were busy repairing infrastructure and utilities.

Now, the Department of Defense (DOD)'s first priority since the 1800s has been to protect our continental space, especially furnishing only immediate rescue and initial relief. That's because a disaster emergency is a decades-old exception to the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act legally forbidding military intervention in civilian affairs, particularly law enforcement.

However, as is usual in decades of major natural disasters in the U.S., the Armed Services' tradition has been to be the first responder: Instant action first and fill out bureaucratic paperwork later. That changed in 1988 with two klinkers in the revised Disaster Relief Act of 1988. One required a "FEMA mission assignment letter" prior to the responding to a disaster. It was as if a fire department had to fill out paperwork before racing into a burning building. Without a letter, FEMA wouldn't have to reimburse DOD for its services. The second klinker was the DOD 10-day duration rule, an extension requiring a "request for...resources" from a governor.

In other words, if the Services rushed to Puerto Rico after the first tremor without that FEMA letter, the American taxpayer would pay twice for the same disaster. But by waiting for a letter, the dead, injured, property and utility destruction probably would have been more than twice its current estimates.

President Jimmy Carter created FEMA in 1979 by executive order. Its official mission was limited to coordinating "the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror."

A side-mission was continuing maintenance of the emergency federal city under 100 acres of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains for key government officials in case of a nuclear attack.

The key word in FEMA's job description was to "coordinate" disaster operations. Not command, nor serve in the trenches. How could it with a constant short-handed staff and less than \$3.5 billion (in 2020 dollars) in start-up funds.

It was doomed almost from birth by several impossible and seemingly unavoidable obstacles laid by presidents, Congress, the 1988 Stafford Act's bureaucratic requirements, staff low morale—and Mother Nature.

FEMA's first and greatest obstacle was depending on Congress' quixotic or politically driven appropriations. For instance, the agency's "total budget authorities" came to \$27 billion in FY2017, but \$41.2 billion in FY2018, \$18.7 billion in FY2019, and close to \$29 billion this year. Too often that meant begging Congress for supplements to cover huge, unexpected man-made disasters such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 and unanticipated costs of gigantic hurricanes like Katrina and Maria.

Presidents' budgets for FEMA have revealed disdain and/or disregard not only for the agency, but the lives of thousands affected by each disaster. The most infamous exhibit up to Trump was George H. W. Bush's failure to appoint a FEMA administrator between June 1989 to August 1990. Subordinates were left to cope with two successive major disasters in fall 1989: South Carolina's Class 5 Hurricane Hugo in September and San Francisco's M-6.9 earthquake in October.

Trump cruelly withheld \$16 billion out of \$18 billion Congress appropriated for Puerto Rico's recovery from Maria on grounds of poor financial controls by its government. Currently, he's threatening to veto a supplementary bill the House just passed (237-161) for \$4.89 billion in earthquake relief. Two years ago, he illegally shifted \$9.8 million in 2018 from FEMA's operations-and-support account to ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) for migrant detention costs.

Lawsuits—2,000 for 2016's Hurricane Sandy alone—also have cut FEMA's appropriations. Those involved alleged delays of reimbursements to disaster survivors for deaths and property damages, and claims disputes. So does the possibility of having to reimburse DOD for rescue and relief services in disasters. Considering that taxpayers fund FEMA and that the agency could be paying the DOD for disaster expenses, the public is being double-dipped and gipped by FEMA into the bargain.

The second obstacle has been structure, thrust upon the agency at the start by Carter's decision to merge five turf-conscious, disaster-related agencies, offices, and some 100 programs for rapid responses. After 9/11, it was forced to absorb 22 federal agencies when President Bush Junior yanked FEMA's cabinet status given by President Clinton and made it a subordinate agency of his new Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

The major shortcoming making matters worse was the 1988 Stafford Act. Designed to tighten FEMA structural operations, it also was intended to replicate procedures of other federal entities, but as a life-and-death emergency service, it was not like those bureaucracies. Though the sole mission was still to "coordinate" disaster operations, that law strangled them with bureaucratic red-tape stipulations. Stafford's nightmare constraints soon turned disaster recoveries into monumental logistical and humanitarian catastrophes.

Despite the bedlam in the early hours of a disaster, FEMA was now required to monitor delivery and distribution of all incoming goods and services even from state and local governments. Vetting of local hires and volunteers had to be done before they were permitted to work. The insult to private relief organizations was that before they could operate, the DHS Secretary had to ensure they had preparedness expertise, accreditation and certification.

But Stafford's death-dealing provision was that FEMA couldn't begin coordinating federal disaster entities until after a state or territory's governor determined a disaster was beyond its resources and then requesting a president declare a national emergency. Bypassing a governor's request was permissible only if the disaster involved federal property (e.g., Oklahoma City, 9/11).

For Puerto Rico's quakes, it took Vázquez 11 days—from the first tremors December 28 until January 15—to contact Trump. He made the emergency declaration that evening, but took eight more days to release some of the \$16 billion he had withheld from the Maria disaster.

This hodgepodge of hundreds of separate moving parts finally ground to an earth-shattering G-stop in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the New Orleans region. It dramatized FEMA's "bureaucratic dysfunction" to the public, according to one conservative website's editor. Media coverage indicated the agency was a bumbling, blundering, disorganized agency led too often by inexperienced twits. Any success was the work of state and local governments, long-time and experienced relief organizations like the Salvation Army and Red Cross, resourceful locals—and the DOD.

The cure for structural failure was worse than its cause: the 2006 enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act. FEMA's coordinate mission now was to emphasize "preparedness" by state and local governments and community groups in the country's cities (19,495 existed in 2018) immediately following emergency declarations.

So FEMA dutifully set up 10 regional offices to reach the public and teach disaster preparedness ("Whole Community") and local businesses ("Partnerships"). An alphabet-soup of 113 acronymic agency entities were formed such as ERT (Emergency Response Team), FDRC (Federal Disaster Recovery Fund), MERS (Mobile Emergency Response Support). It also hatched task forces for housing, schools, hazards, and the like. For 2018 alone, a FEMA report listed even more moving parts by fielding 4,390 special personnel and some 20,622 temporary and part-time hires to deal with 55 major disasters. Paperwork, internal communiqués, instructional pamphlets and public-relations publications spiked.

The agency's Byzantine structure and culture was to muddle through 2017's twin hurricane ravages of Harvey in Texas and Maria in Puerto Rico. Half its full-time staff were shifted to emergency duties for which they were neither trained or were "ill suited."

An internal report and one from the federal GAO (Government Accountability Office) found FEMA's coordination failures to be legion in Puerto Rico, starting with that shortage of specialized disaster personnel. That created heavy reliance on local emergency crews and contractors. Warehouses lacked supplies of tarps and cots. "Serious flaws" were found in supply contracts seemingly because deliveries and designations weren't tracked and supply containers had no content manifests. Only 695 working generators were available despite needs of thousands. Satellite phone shortages significantly cut communications.

FEMA's third obstacle has been the lack of disaster experience in most of the agency's parade of 11 administrators over the years. Only two experts—James Lee Witt (April 1993-January 2001), Craig Fugate (May 2009-January 2017)—stayed beyond a three-year average. Two resigned—Louis Giuffrida, Brock Long—over accusations of misconduct. President George H. W. Bush's year-long failure to appoint an administrator meant FEMA was rudderless at the time of Hugo when it swept through South Carolina.

Infuriated by coordination screw-ups, its senator Ernest Hollings took to the Senate floor to declare FEMA as "the sorriest bunch of bureaucratic jackasses I've ever worked with.... We still need more troops. We still need more generators; we need housing. The trailers are all backed up in Atlanta, Ga., and they're giving me the application-bureaucratic-red-tape routine."

The administrator vacancy was open until 2003 when Bush's son George Jr. , as president, finally appointed the hapless, disaster-inexperienced Andrew Brown . A former horse-race official, he had been at FEMA for less than five years, first as a lawyer, then deputy director. Brown lasted a little over two years (March 2003-September 2005) during which he and the FEMA were totally overwhelmed by Katrina.

Trump's hatred and vindictive treatment of the territory has not abated. His repeated lie at rallies and tweets that Congress voted it \$42.7 billion out of a non-existent \$92 billion in the last three years. Helping to set this lie in stone are Republican members like Texas' Ron Wright who raised the imaginary sum to \$44 billion.

It took heavy pressure late last year from House Democrats —and six party presidential candidates—to pry the remaining \$16 billion for Maria. The price Trump demanded were tighter strings , guaranteeing more long-term delays for recovery and governmental stability.

Among the strings were that Puerto Rico's government submit budget plans for those billions to a federal board of fiscal control. It also had to suspend the island's \$15 per hour minimum wage, and provide an updated property registration data base even though most residents lack land titles or evidence of ownership. That included the 135,000 who fled mostly to Florida and Texas after Maria, and, now, hundreds from the quakes.

Two days after Trump released the funds, residents followed rumors and broke into a warehouse and found tons of FEMA-marked relief goods for Maria: water, cots, propane tanks, medical supplies, baby food and other desperately needed emergency supplies.

Wired's Garrett M. Graff, summed up FEMA's obstacles, most of which are unknown to the public:

"FEMA was hobbled from the start, limited by weak central leadership, full of political patrons, and pulled in multiple directions by its disparate priorities—some public, some secret. As one Reagan-era assessment of the agency concluded, 'FEMA may well be suffering from a case of too many missions for too few staff and resources.... FEMA itself might be a mission impossible'The agency's history as a dumping ground for political patronage did little to help its reputation—just as predecessor civil defense agencies had been parking lots for presidential friends and one-time governors, FEMA had nearly 10 times the normal proportion of political appointees."

Turning to today's pending climate-change Armageddon, deniers like Trump may denigrate official reports and studies by thousands of world-renown climatologists about carbon's role in overheating the planet and causing rising global temperatures and humidity. But not the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)'s frightening photographic evidence of its increasing signs around the globe. They've been supported by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UOCS) which has cited rising global temperatures and humidity causing

- Hotter air over lower atmospheres, oceans, land
- Rising sea levels and surface temperatures
- Diminishing Arctic sea ice
- Melting glaciers
- Reduction in snow cover

In turn, these conditions trigger drought, wildfires, and more frequent and intense blizzards, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes.

The latest signal of oncoming death and destruction by carbon-caused heat has been Antarctica's mind-boggling 69.35°F temperature registered in February 1. Such melts at both poles and surrounding ice sheets have already affected America's coastal areas—where 40 percent of our population lives. They are experiencing speedups of sea-level rise, according to the annual report from scientists at William & Mary's Virginia Institute of Marine Science. The highest are off Louisiana and Texas; 23 state levels can be viewed on the Sea Level Rise website (<https://sealevelrise.org>).

With FEMA's performances likely to get worse with these conditions, it beggars belief that the agency can possibly coordinate the coming global-warming Armageddon. The only possible, skillful, and available force able to protect Americans in the coming gigantic disasters is the DOD—like it or not. In the last 40 years, it has been doing the heaviest lifting for most FEMA major disaster assignments, Katrina to Puerto Rico's hurricanes and, now, its non-stop quakes and tremors.

Using the Armed Services to handle epic disasters has been singled out by (ret.) Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, a distinguished officer with 31 years in the military, a chief-of-staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, and now a member of the Climate Security and Advisory Group. As he put it:

“ You can't get ready for this crisis without a whole lot of people to handle it. As much as I may have a fear of the Department of Defense becoming so instrumental in meeting what might be the worst crisis the world has ever confronted, I still understand that they are the only ones with the capability—with organization and discipline—to handle this.”

DOD has had over 100 years of honing its skills and stockpiling resources for disasters. One of its greatest early achievements was in the famous seven-state 1927 Mississippi river flood, still considered America's worst. Its joint operations with the National Guard units saved more than a million lives. As author John Barry described the Armed Services fast, effective, and massive response:

“Within two days, its people were on the front lines: 800 large ships from the Navy and 128 small boats from the Coast Guard pulled 43,853 people off rooftops, chimneys, utility poles, railroad cars, collapsing levees and treetops. The Coast Guard’s 674-member rescue team also saved 11,313 head of livestock and rushed 72 injured refugees to hospitals. The Navy and National Guard flew endless rescue-and-supply missions. The Army furnished tents, cots, blankets, rations, and field kitchens to the thousands of refugees in 154 levee camps—even teaching basic plumbing skills.”

For Maria, the Armed Services’ 11,000 regulars operated like a SWAT team, delivering supplies, equipment, as well as a hospital ship and medical staff.

They spent 12-16 hour days rescuing 3,000 people, clearing roads, and distributing essentials (food, water, medicine, blankets, etc.). Heavy-duty trucks transported survivors, as well as 64 power poles to restore power— and solar panels for homes and buildings. The Corps of Engineers did extensive repair work after the Guajataca dam’s collapse: spillway, water gates, waterline reconnections, irrigation channel, and operating 10 pumps to move water from the dam’s reservoir to that channel.

The DOD certainly has the money for natural disasters. Few in Congress—especially if their state has a military base or company making Armed Services goods and services—are likely to question DOD spending at all. Its FY2020 \$738 billion allocation and unspent millions are readily available. It just found \$9.8 billion to build Trump’s border wall. One military expert estimated its “bureaucratic waste” alone over the next five years would be at least \$125 billion .

Presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg is promising to institute a “senior climate security role” — a FEMA duplicate—in DOD to fight climate change. Obviously, he doesn’t know what it has been doing all these years about climatic disasters or recognize why it’s not needed.

Moreover, the DOD has been well aware of global warming since 1990, according to a Columbia University Earth Institute spokesperson who noted it has been “actively working” on how to deal with “the worst effects of global warming, including flooding, extreme weather, and migration conflicts.”

Chris Edwards, the Cato Institute’s director of Tax Policy Studies, wrote a lengthy encyclopedic 2014 essay suggesting FEMA be abolished. He theorized that after the Armed Services completed rescue and relief, the recovery stage of a disaster should be left to state and local governments, as well as the experienced relief organizations, but particularly local residents. They know what’s needed, where to get it, and are able to deliver it on the spot in a timely way. Disaster aid, he noted always pours in from thousands around the nation and the globe. His view was that

“... policymakers should end FEMA aid for disaster preparedness, response, and relief. They should repeal the [National Fire Insurance Program] and move flood insurance to the private sector. Those reforms would reduce FEMA spending by more than 90 percent. Remaining activities that may fulfill a unique role—such as flood mapping, planning for the continuity of government, and preparedness for technological and radiological hazards—should be moved to other federal agencies.”

Eliminations of Federal departments and agencies and subsequent downsizing of staffs is nothing new, especially with the Trump administration. Every federal full- or part-time FEMA staffer is

well aware of “Reduction in Force” (“riffing”) procedures, given the cacophony of criticism and threats to the agency over the years. Knowing the Office of Personnel Management goes to some lengths to find the downsized another governmental job, preserving pensions and other benefits, many probably have been ready to jump almost daily. Above all, FEMA staffers—administrator to file clerk—know global warming will overwhelm that agency, but not the DOD. Like it or not.