

Obama's disaster-prone presidency

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By: Gene Healy

Last week brought raging Colorado wildfires and a massive mid-Atlantic storm that killed 13 and left three million without power. And when hard luck and bad weather strike, a presidential visit is sure to follow. It's part of the modern president's job to descend upon the wounded land, ministering to the afflicted with soothing words and truckloads of federal aid.

George W. Bush took to that role eagerly, with a record-setting average of 129 presidential disaster declarations a year. Bush waxed messianic in May 2007 when he manifested himself in a tornado-ravaged Kansas burg, aiming to "lift people's spirits ... and to hopefully touch somebody's soul by representing our country ... to let people know that while there was a dark day in the past, there's brighter days ahead."

Barack Obama, who shattered the single-year record for disaster declarations with 242 last year, added three more to this year's total last week, in West Virginia and swing states Colorado and Ohio.

Obama didn't threaten to touch anybody's soul when he alighted in Colorado Springs Friday, but he did invoke his familiar, familial theme: "When challenges like this happen, all of us come together as one American family."

Pardon me for injecting a note of cynicism into this atmosphere of family togetherness, but would it shock you to hear that presidents play politics with disaster relief? Current law gives them enormous power to do so, and it seems they don't try very hard to resist the temptation.

The 1988 Stafford Disaster Relief Act authorized the president to issue disaster declarations virtually at will, giving him broad discretion over the disbursement of federal aid. In a study published last fall, Boston University political scientist Andrew Reeves crunched the numbers on presidential disaster declarations from 1981 to 2004, and found strong evidence that presidents distribute aid with one eye toward the Electoral College.

"In the post-Stafford Act era," Reeves explains, "a competitive state is expected to receive over twice the number of disaster declarations as a noncompetitive state." What's more, the FEMA porkbarrel pays off politically: "Voters reward presidents for disaster declarations to the tune of over 1 percent at the ballot box."

After Congress expanded presidents' disaster relief powers in 1988, Reeves notes, they were, unsurprisingly, "more likely to grant [relief] in year four as the presidential election neared." This year, Obama's running behind 2011's record-setting pace -- but there's time left before November, and plenty of incentive to convert natural disasters into political gain.

"What I'm not gonna do is wait for Congress," President Obama told "60 Minutes" last December: "wherever we have an opportunity and I have the executive authority to go ahead and get some things done, we're just gonna go ahead and do 'em."

Executive orders on housing and student loans, regulatory waivers in health care and education, discretion over immigration enforcement -- the president has enormous unilateral power to reward favored constituencies in the run-up to Election Day, as Obama's "We Can't Wait" offensive has shown. In most cases, he enjoys those powers because feckless legislators ceded them.

Presidential control over the FEMA porkbarrel is one more weapon in that political arsenal. While few in Congress are likely to sign on to the proposal by Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, to abolish FEMA, they can at least, as the Heritage Foundation's Matt Mayer argues, reform the Stafford Act to "establish clear requirements that limit the types of situations in which declarations can be issued -- eliminating some types of disasters entirely from FEMA's portfolio."

It's past time Congress started clawing back some of the territory it's ceded. We can't wait.

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