

Review: Disasters and Democracy: The Politics of Extreme Natural Events

Rutherford H. Platt (Ed.)

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Natural disasters in the United States cost \$20 billion a year in direct costs to government, the insurance industry, and to victims, and the costs continue to burgeon. Non-economic losses are not only death and the tragedy of grief, but also the loss of family pets and treasured irreplaceable items. These papers discuss the history and impact of government legislation of compensating communities for tragedies related to floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and brush fires. Before 1950, disaster assistance was viewed as the moral responsibility of the community, charities, and church groups, according to a 1916 court decision defining "Acts of God." The Federal Disaster Relief Act of 1950 marked the beginning of a half-century of federal laws, programs, and policies intended to reduce the economic burden on stricken communities.

Chapter 1 traces the evolution of federal initiatives and relief measures such as grants, subsidized loans, federal insurance policies, and technical assistance. The chapter ends with a discussion of when compassion leads to "codependency" whereby the victims and government become locked into a repetitive cycle of loss and compensation. Chapter 2 discusses the geographical distribution of presidential disaster declarations under the Stafford Act. Chapter 3 traces the various approaches to hazard mitigation since the 1960s and what the federal role should be. Chapters 4 and 5 in Part II examine the property rights movement and the takings issue as obstacles to hazard mitigation through land use restrictions in areas of known risk.

Disasters and Democracy is more than a fascinating read; it will open the public's eyes to the real problems and costs associated with disaster relief. The book is splendidly illustrated with photographs, tables, and maps. It is an excellent comprehensive and critical analysis of public policy on natural hazards in the United States. Platt outlines a number of feasible steps the federal government should take to ease the disincentives that reduce local government efforts to create disaster-resistant communities. Anyone with an interest in environmental and natural disasters will find something of great

interest within its covers.

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