

HSPI Commentary Series

RECKLESS NEGLECT: A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN...AGAIN?

HSPI Commentary 05

Friday, August 28, 2009

Stephen Flynn, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Sharon L. Cardash

Katrina, the costliest hurricane in U.S. history, roared ashore on the Gulf Coast four years ago on August 29, 2005. The images of floating corpses and storm survivors stranded on rooftops and at the Superdome will long be seared in our collective memories. Even today, many families throughout the Gulf region are finding the road to recovery to be a long and arduous one.

For those of us during the late summer of 2005 who were fortunate enough to reside outside of harm's way, we should pause on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina to reflect on this sobering fact: 9 out of 10 Americans live in a place that faces a moderate to high risk of a natural disaster. North America is a beautiful continent, but Mother Nature is not always very kind to it. Earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, wildfires, hurricanes, flooding, blizzards, and high-wind damage are always in the offing.

While Katrina serves as a forceful reminder of the inevitability of natural disasters, it underscores another important lesson: the risk we will become victims will rise dramatically if we neglect infrastructure. We now know that New Orleans should have survived the storm largely unscathed. The city's flood protection system was supposed to withstand a direct hit by a powerful Category 3 hurricane. But New Orleans dodged the worst of the storm because at the last minute, Katrina's center veered east so that the winds that buffeted New Orleans were barely above Category 1. Tragically, because the levees had been so shabbily maintained, they started to fail even before the full fury of the storm had arrived. In the end, it was not an Act of God that doomed so many New Orleanians. It was the neglect of man.

For too long, Americans have been taking for granted the critical infrastructure built by the sweat, ingenuity, and investment of our forebears. From roads and bridges to schools and dams, the foundations upon which are modern lives rely are aging, and not gracefully. For decades, we have been unwilling to invest in caring for the things that assure the safety and quality of our lives. Like the Roman Empire before us, we are beginning to experience the human and economic consequences of recklessly allowing our infrastructure to decay.



But there is a wiser and more responsible way, and we need look no further than America's heartland to find it. In the spring of 1997, the citizens of Grand Forks, North Dakota had a New Orleans-like experience when the Red River overflowed its banks. The cost of that disaster came to roughly \$2 billion. But this past April and May when the Red River crested at an even higher level than it had 12 years before, the city spent only \$500,000 dealing with the flood. Indeed, daily life in North Dakota's third largest city barely missed a beat thanks to an improved flood control system completed in 2007. This investment in resilient infrastructure meant that when Mother Nature did her worst, the city did not break. Instead of becoming victims, many of the residents of Grand Forks even ended up serving as rescuers, assisting smaller communities downriver.

Resilient infrastructure is what Americans should be investing in nationwide. Unfortunately, we may be passing up an historic opportunity for doing so. President Obama has made rebuilding the nation's infrastructure a centerpiece of his economic stimulus package. But the first priority of his economic team has been to spend money quickly on so-called "shovel-ready projects." This has translated into passing up the chance of ensuring that new projects are evaluated to determine if they incorporate design features that assure that our critical foundations can survive foreseeable manmade and natural disasters. Future federal spending should correct this oversight and assign the highest priority to projects that will make communities safer in the face of hazards while providing meaningful economic and environmental benefits over the long-term.

In the past, catastrophes have served as a catalyst for changing the way we construct infrastructure. For instance, the great fires in Chicago in 1871, in Boston in 1872, and the earthquake of San Francisco in 1906 prompted the creation of new building codes. The recent experience of Grand Forks suggests we should and can be doing the same today. Moving forward, as infrastructure is repaired, upgraded, and modernized, we should insist that public funds are spent using disaster experiences as a guide.

Four years ago when Hurricane Katrina swept through the region, the Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) was among the casualties when the city's flood control system failed. Four of SUNO's eleven academic buildings were damaged beyond repair. A few weeks ago, on August 17th, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano was at Southern University to announce that funding would at last be provided to replace those buildings. Let us hope that the students who will be educated in those new facilities, as well as in schools and universities around the country, will learn and take to heart the most important lesson that Katrina should have taught all of us. Neglecting the foundations that have made us a resilient society is short-sighted and self-destructive.



Stephen Flynn is the Ira A. Lipman Senior Fellow for Counterterrorism and National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. **Frank J. Cilluffo** is Director of The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI). **Sharon L. Cardash** is HSPI's Associate Director

HSPI Commentaries are intended to promote better policy by fostering constructive debate among leading policymakers, academics, and observers. Designed to be timely and relevant, HSPI Commentaries seek to illuminate the issues of the day by raising important questions and challenging underpinning assumptions. Opinions expressed in Commentaries are those of the author(s) alone. Comments should be directed to hspi@gwu.edu.

Founded in 2003, The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) is a nonpartisan think and do tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.