What Comes Around, Goes Around (and Around and Around): Reviving the Lost History of FEMA and its Importance to Future Disasters

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Abstract

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) lacks a coherent historical record. Often this results in the agency repeating the mistakes of its past. By creating a comprehensive public record of FEMA and national emergency management efforts over the last half century, FEMA can break its cycle of repeating past failures and rediscover successes that were otherwise lost to current emergency management leadership.

Suggested Citation


Introduction

In January 2014, government officials and citizens began to reflect on two emergency programs the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) put into place after Hurricane Sandy in New York. The Rapid Repairs and the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) programs were an innovative way for FEMA to use its authorities, normally limited to providing temporary housing, to make minor repairs to the homes of disaster survivors. Instead of spending millions more to place these families in hotel rooms, rental resources or other temporary housing, FEMA could allow survivors to stay in their homes, saving millions of dollars and reducing the angst of those forced to leave their communities behind.

However, like any government program created from scratch in the midst of a disaster, it suffered from significant problems, inefficiencies, and poor implementation. If only the Federal Coordinating Officer for FEMA and his state and local government counterparts did not have to create and deliver these programs on the fly. It turns out they did not. These programs had already been delivered to the public almost exactly 40 years earlier.
May 11-12, 1973 Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Disaster Relief of the Committee On Public Works, United States Senate, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Senator Burdick. I believe that for the first time in any major disaster OEP [Office of Emergency Preparedness] used a so-called minirepair approach whereby damaged homes were repaired or restored directly by your agency or by the corps to make them inhabitable. What can you tell us about the way you observed the minirepair program?

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Mr. Carney. Basic theory of it was, sir, that if we made these minimal repairs on a house we, could keep the people in their homes. The Governor and I talked about this. He agreed that this was the desirable thing to do, to keep the people in their homes. What this would do, of course, is cut down on the necessity for trailers. The outside cost of this averaged out about $3,000. So you were comparing three thousand on minirepair against 7,000 or 8,000 plus to put a person in a trailer park. So it was in lieu of temporary housing. I would say this, that the minirepair program is the program that enabled us to finish our temporary housing in September. It made the difference.

Senator Burdick. Do you know how many units were involved in that program?

Mr. Carney. It was a $9 million program, and 2,780 houses were repaired.

FEMA’S Missing History

The parallels of the 1972 Minirepair and 2012 Rapid Repair/STEP Programs were completely unintentional, right down to their names. Nearly 40 years after Hurricane Agnes, FEMA had rolled out a “model” program that had already been tested and executed nearly 40 years ago. What happened in those 40 years? Why was FEMA, in 2012, using a pilot process to run a program that had been around since 1972? The reason is that FEMA has no historical record of the delivery of its programs or its legislative and policy origins over the 66 years of modern federal disaster relief, nor has FEMA developed a way of delivering this information to senior leadership for practical implementation. In short, FEMA finds itself in decade-long loops, repeating the successes and failures of its leaders from decades before.

The amount of history, even recent history and policy development, that has been lost for consumption can be illustrated from my search for an original copy of the first Federal Response Plan (FRP). For nearly two years, I scrounged the Internet and walked the halls of FEMA headquarters looking for a copy of the FRP, the forerunner of today’s National Response Framework. Issued in 1992, not a single copy could be found anywhere. I thought my last chance would be to take leave and make a trip to FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute (EMI) to search its aging U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) library to see if a version of the original FRP could be found. Using their search tool, I discovered later that there were two copies. However, at the time, my only option for accessing the document was a day off work and a 150-mile round trip.
Then, by happenstance, I found a link on the Internet. It turns out the only publically available digitized copy of the original FRP can be found on a server belonging to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras.

The lack of effective historical archives covering the historical underpinnings of FEMA and Emergency Management stands in stark contrast to the situation at my previous government employer. I vividly remember spending a whole Saturday of one of my precious liberty weekends from The Basic School in 1999, drifting through the stacks of the recently built United States Marine Corps Research Library at Quantico and its 150,000 volumes. This library, part of the larger Library of the Marine Corps, is a small part of an entire Marine Corps command, led by a Major General, devoted to educational transformation, skill development, career learning, feedback, and implementation. By comparison, FEMA Headquarters, separated from the USFA library at EMI by a 74 mile drive, is nearly completely cut off from its historical base of Emergency Management knowledge. The situation is even worse for its 10 Regional Headquarters and litany of Joint Field Offices. The bare bones of FEMAs virtual library is illustrated by the paucity of historical materials it makes available.

The Marine Corps, founded 204 years before FEMA, clearly had a head start on preserving its historical record, but the gulf between the nation's second smallest military service and FEMA is not just explained by a calendar. While there are probably many reasons for the disparity, two reasons come readily to mind. First, the Marine Corps makes its history a seminal force in its ethos, which was done partly to make the Marine Corps different from its sister services since many of its capabilities can be replicated by the others. This means that every Marine remembers that the Corps was founded (in a tavern) on November 10, 1775, and likely retains hazy memories of the litany of battles from Bladensburg to Fallujah that are read at every Mess Night. But beyond the cultural and peer bonding aspects, there is a practical side to this.

For over 70 years, the basic Marine infantry squad has featured 13 Marines led by a sergeant. One can trace a direct line between the Fleet Marine Force Manual MCWP 3-11.2, Marine Rifle Squad, from 2002 and similar publications from the end of World War II, which can be easily found in the Library of the Marine Corps. The lessons learned decades or even a century ago are not just remembered; they directly inform even the most basic functions of today's Marine Corps. This simple example shows how the proliferation and ready availability of historical literature to the public can accelerate the diffusion of knowledge outside traditional structures.

For instance, when I wanted to read a pertinent excerpt from the 1945 rifle squad manual cited above, there was not a digitized copy in the library. However I could find exactly what I wanted to know on a personal website which had posted portions of it. In a world increasingly affected by ideas and knowledge from outside traditional mainstream sources of academia and subject matter experts, the creation and dissemination of histories and reports allows the public to both learn and participate in shaping the future of a discipline while preserving the lessons of the past.

The second advantage of having a robust archive is the traditional professional collection of military histories. One of the older and most prominent examples is the massive Post-Civil War collection entitled The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. This group of records is so detailed that with a quick search I can find a mention of my great-great grandfather, Abel T. Sweet, leading a Union infantry battalion on an expedition that included the burning of the Virginia Military Institute.
example illustrates what can happen when there is common interest between Congress and a Federal agency to devote the necessary resources to preserve and disseminate historically priceless and important government records and histories. It also begs the question of why, with so many former military members serving within FEMA, there has been so little recognition of the value of archiving up until this point.

This does not mean that FEMA lacks the infrastructure to relearn its past. The National Training and Education Division, housed within the National Preparedness Directorate, is tailor-made for this mission, encompassing the Center for Domestic Preparedness, EMI, the National Training and Education Division (NTED) and the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security (for which I wrote my thesis that led me on the search for the FRP). The (re)creation of FEMA’s historical record and delivery to leaders of the Emergency Management enterprise, including senior leaders from both inside and outside of government, could easily fall within the mission of EMI, NTED or EMI’s Emergency Management Higher Education Program.

Interestingly, in its earliest days FEMA did have a somewhat robust historical program. Buried within the link found in the footnote is one of the most important historical legacies given to early FEMA, *A Legislative History of Federal Disaster Relief, 1950–1974*. Hand typed, it reflects the doggedness and thoroughness of a man who waited 44 years for the University of Chicago finally to accept his doctoral thesis and would see his obituary published in both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Completed in 1983, it was one of at least two monographs that linked the nascent FEMA to its predecessor agencies. The other, *American Civil Defense, 1945–1984: The Evolution of Programs and Policies*, was published in 1985. Since 1985, a third document, *Our Missing Shield: The U.S. Civil Defense Program in Historical Perspective*, also stands with these two. However, other than a word document entitled *Historical Overview of U.S. Emergency Management*, prepared over a decade ago, essentially no other substantive historical records could be found within FEMA. Those that can be located are buried where only the curious or the bored can find them.

With the exception of a 36-page DHS volume issued in 2006, *Civil Defense and Homeland Security: A Short History of National Preparedness Efforts*, it does not appear FEMA has issued a single comprehensive historical monograph or retrospective since the mid-1980s. To put this in perspective, if I want to read about my fellow Marines in their fight at An-Nasiriyah, Iraq, I can find a 50-page official history on just that one battle alone.

What are the Potential Benefits of Reclaiming FEMA’s History to the Agency and the Public?

If FEMA, DHS, and Congress did invest in a vigorous historical program at FEMA, what would be the benefits to the agency and taxpayers? As an answer, I can provide several examples beyond just the STEP Program.

In 2013, based upon research I had uncovered for my thesis, I published a blog post on how in the early 1980s FEMA attempted to create a deductible for disasters. A disaster deductible could provide an objective means to measure a state’s contribution to disaster
relief and more accurately capture the division of state and federal responsibilities for paying for disasters. The adoption of a deductible could also provide an incentive to focus on preparedness and mitigation efforts rather than the current federal disaster relief system, which places its primary focus on response and recovery. Completely lost to the agency, the disaster deductible concept has now been revived and was recently the subject of a FEMA Federal Register Notice.19

My thesis also discusses the 1990s FRP concept of lead federal agencies. The idea that a lead federal agency, as overall coordinator of a federal response to a catastrophic event, could be picked from among the agencies with the most technical expertise, and be assigned legal and executive responsibility for the particular type of catastrophe, has also picked up traction within the executive branch in the last two years.

There are two other areas of Federal disaster coordination that might also benefit from looking to FEMA’s past. Since at least 1980, FEMA has used the title of Disaster Recovery Manager (DRM) as a way to delegate authority during disasters from FEMA’s Regional Administrators to Federal Coordinating Officers (FCOs) who coordinate the Federal response to disasters under the Stafford Act. While the origins of the term are unclear, from an initial analysis it appears the DRM position may have been originally created to relieve Regional Administrators of the long term and onerous responsibility for FEMA’s Public Assistance Program. This is the FEMA program that provides billions to state, local, and tribal governments and other eligible grant recipients to reimburse them for damages related to disasters.

Over time, DRM authority somehow became a way to delegate Federal disaster coordination authority and the ability to direct other Federal agencies to respond to disasters and then to reimburse them. This is likely unnecessary as this authority extends directly from the President to the DHS Secretary to the FEMA Administrator. Most, if not all of the Regional Administrator’s disaster response and recovery-related authority is shared with the FEMA administrator Therefore the need for FCOs to seek DRM authority adds just another bureaucratic layer to FEMA’s disaster response efforts.

Another area of Federal disaster response and coordination that could benefit from an enhanced archive is FEMA’s mission assignment program. Mission assignments are FEMA’s authority, delegated from the President, to direct Federal agencies to respond to disasters when they normally do not have the authority to respond. It also allows FEMA to reimburse those Federal agencies for their efforts. It may be the single most important tool FEMA has when responding to disasters. However, FEMA lacks any comprehensive mission assignment program. Instead, it has mainly focused on its technical delivery aspects while neglecting any sort of comprehensive policy or broader strategy encompassing training, policy, structured interagency coordination, and cross-coordination with national and state planning efforts. As a result, its regulations are outdated and it has no systemic way to supervise the issuance of mission assignments during disasters or to look at the broader policy questions on their use.

A thorough review of mission assignments, from their beginnings in the 1950’s through to the present, could be of particular value in addressing these shortfalls, which could include updating FEMA regulations, the substance of which predate the founding of the agency. For example, FEMA’s mission assignment regulations are so outdated, they make no mention of one of the two main types of assignments, those for Federal Operational Support (FOS) which were created in the early 1990’s after Hurricane Andrew. This review, including provisions of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA) which include mission
assignments, could also inform potential significant policy changes. These changes could include updating FEMA’s regulations to allow it to use mission assignments to direct and reimburse Federal agencies to respond to disasters even when they have their own authority and appropriations to do so. Another potential change could be using mission assignments to carry out FEMA’s Homeland Security Act authority rather than just the authority delegated to it under the Stafford Act by the President.

Returning to the original example of the Rapid Repair and STEP Programs, if the pilot rapid repair program of 1972 had become a longstanding Public Assistance Policy handed down to FEMA, or had been rediscovered in a review of its previous attempts at disaster relief innovation and program delivery, it might have made a significant contribution to the efficiency of FEMA’s response. Instead of waiting until two weeks after landfall, the Rapid Repair and STEP Programs could have been launched immediately after the size of the catastrophe was revealed. Moreover, these programs could have been exercised and reviewed for years prior to being used, likely leading to a far more coordinated rollout and efficient execution. These programs probably would also have provided great utility in Hurricanes Andrew, Katrina and a handful of other major disasters over the intervening years, potentially saving millions of dollars. The fact that FEMA leaders had no idea about the Hurricane Agnes Minirepair Program was not their failure; it was FEMA’s failure over the preceding 30 plus years to pass on its history and lessons learned to its latest team of leadership.

Beyond the development and rediscovery of programs lost, there could be one other major benefit to FEMA: inspiration. FEMA, at its core, is a boring organization. With a mission that is anything but boring, FEMA too often finds itself implementing the definition of boring; “dull and uninteresting” solutions to the problems it faces. Proof of this fundamental issue affecting FEMA is reflected in its latest Viewpoint results from 2015. The 2015 Viewpoint Survey, which helps measure the morale of Federal agencies, showed barely more than one quarter of FEMA’s employees believe innovation and creativity are rewarded.

Making FEMA’s leaders and employees more familiar with their agency’s history and the programs delivered by it and its predecessors might inspire the next good idea. For rarely is innovation and creativity truly spontaneous, rather it often needs a spark. Reinvesting and teaching FEMA’s collective history might provide that spark.

What should FEMA do?

First, FEMA needs to invest in its USFA library at EMI. A thorough review needs to be conducted to ascertain whether it has the necessary acquisitions and research material to become the premier Emergency Management knowledge repository in the world. Any shortfalls or deficiencies should be identified and FEMA should provide a specific cost for both acquisitions and maintenance. However, given FEMA’s unique ability within the Federal Government to accept donations, it should also seek to acquire materials and books through less costly means. FEMA should also seek to partner with other libraries and academic institutions, which could lead to alternative ways to make these books and materials readily accessible to FEMA and other government employees, Emergency Management practitioners, academics and the general public. These efforts should also include making a serious attempt at acquiring or making available materials from other nations to build up a body of comparative research.
Second, FEMA must make the entirety of its original and government-produced materials available online. FEMA’s employees are scattered across the country, and many of them are reservists who only have substantive and continuing contact with FEMA upon deployment. FEMA Headquarters is situated too far away to make easy use of its physical library, and as far as I know, there are no plans to move it to St. Elizabeths in the next decade. This might not make sense anyway, as EMI’s mission already makes it a worthwhile home for the library. Digitizing these holdings would also be a leap forward in carrying out FEMA’s mission to support the Nation and the Whole Community by “leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.” These online resources would now make them freely available, at minimum effort, to emergency managers of every rank, cutting across traditional professional boundaries, academics and students, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, media, and the public with a goal of creating a spontaneous combustion of new ideas and practices.

Third, FEMA needs to embark on a serious effort to collect, synthesize, and disperse the lessons found in its history, particularly those related to disaster response and recovery. One approach would be the creation of a comprehensive disaster program book that would provide an overview of the programs provided by FEMA and its predecessor agencies to every declared disaster or emergency under the Disaster Relief Acts, and their successor, the Stafford Act.

Fourth, the decade's long struggle between All Hazards and Civil Defense also shares strong parallels to that between Emergency Management and Homeland Security. Congress originally created two parallel sets of authorities for disaster relief and Civil Defense in 1950. Throughout the next four decades, Civil Defense and disaster relief, which became associated with a focus on “All Hazards”, competed for resources. Increasingly, state officials saw the utility of additional funding for their All Hazards responsibilities. At the same time, the enormous nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union increasingly made Civil Defense a fantasy and Governors and other officials pushed to allow Civil Defense funding and resources to be used for disaster relief also. It wasn't until after Hurricane Andrew in 1992 that the wall between the two missions finally fell.

The current struggle to balance the resources devoted to terrorism and other Homeland Security responsibilities with those devoted to disaster relief could be seen as the natural continuation of the historical tension between Civil Defense and All Hazards. A review of these issues might prove informative to FEMA and national leadership as FEMA expands the use of its Homeland Security Act authorities. It may also be fruitful for FEMA to conduct interviews with past leadership and employees, with a particular emphasis placed on those who served in its predecessor agencies in the 1960s and 1970s, and those who transitioned their responsibilities to FEMA throughout the 1980s.

Fifth, FEMA should build on the legislative history it already has through 1984 and create a second volume that goes through the present day. This could have a significant effect on any future efforts to update or revise the Stafford Act.

The Stafford Act is the primary legal authority for the President to mobilize the resources of the Federal Government to assist States in responding to and recovering from disasters. Created in 1988, the Stafford Act renamed and significantly revised the 1974 Disaster Relief Act, which in turn replaced the two other major disaster relief acts from 1950 and 1970. Congress provides a stand-alone fund, the Disaster Relief Fund, to carry out the activities authorized under the Act.
Given that the current Stafford Act is a jigsaw puzzle of the compilation of these earlier major disaster relief acts, several other major laws, and the addition of the remnants of the Civil Defense Act, such a legislative history could be an exceptional resource open to policymakers, academics, and the public. One area particularly ripe for review is the historical evolution of the statutory authority for the President to provide direct federal assistance upon the issuance of a disaster declaration. For nearly 60 years, the original statutory language, much of which still remains in the Stafford Act, has been stitched together with various other additions and deletions across the decades. Even short of a statutory revision of these authorities, such a review could provide significant dividends and expansion of authority to the issuance of mission assignments by FEMA.

Sixth, FEMA needs to create two sets of executive leadership courses based on the exploration of its history. The first would be targeted at senior executives in FEMA, DHS, its partner agencies, and significant non-governmental partners. Similarly situated executives from other nations could also be invited. This course would provide an historical overview of FEMA as well as U.S. history and experience with Emergency Management, and could provide specific case studies of national successes and failures. With so many of these leaders arriving in these positions as a second career or from outside of FEMA, they have never had the opportunity to build upon the decades of study and practical experience found in FEMA's history.

The second set of courses would be targeted at FEMA, state and local Emergency Management program and emergency managers, and would be focused on the history of specific disaster relief programs. For instance, a course could be created just on the evolution of public assistance, as now delivered through the Stafford Act, with the express purpose of directly influencing future disaster relief policies, plans, and programs. Another course for planners might explore the history of policies and choices made during the Civil Defense era balancing evacuations with sheltering in place. These courses would fit well within FEMA's recently created National Emergency Management Executive Academy, which serves a similar purpose but lacks a comprehensive historical, legislative legacy and policy course.23

Through these six recommendations, FEMA would have the opportunity to break its cycle of repeating the same successes and failures of its generations before. They could serve as both a way to discover the best (and poor) practices of the past and to provide inspiration to new ideas, programs, and efficiencies in the future. There is significant value to be mined from the history of FEMA. Sometimes one does not need to find an actual gold mine to make money; it may be buried in dusty archives and aging memories. Who knows what other discoveries await in FEMA's past?
About the Author

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Disclaimer

The views are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Government, the Department of Homeland Security or the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
Notes


8 Actually, The United States Coast Guard is the smallest military service.


10 Marine Corps Schools (U.S.), 1945, The Marine Rifle Squad in Combat, 2nd ed. MCS, 3-26; Medical care studies, 3-26. Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Schools.


14 http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pagevieweridx?c=moawar;cc=moawar;q1=abel;q2=sweet;op2=op3=near;rgn=full%20text;amt2=40;amt3=40;idno=waro0070;didno=waro0070;view=image;seq=0873, accessed April 26, 2016.


