

Tristan J. Weir
Reaction Paper #4 – 3/7/05

Platt – Disasters and Democracy – Introduction and Chapter 1

This week's reading explores the history of federal funding for disaster relief, the current state of affairs, and some of the problems with the current system.

The Introduction provides a view of disaster relief prior to federal involvement. Before the 1950s, disaster mitigation was the responsibility of property owners and disaster relief was left almost entirely to private insurance companies. The Army Corps of Engineers and New Deal contractors both contributed to lowering the flood risk, but the government provided almost no direct aid to victims. In the early part of the century, building and zoning regulations were not designed to decrease exposure to hazard, and the laissez-faire model of government imposed little restriction on the will of the market. Public demand for more federal aid eventually eroded the government's hardline stance, but it was not until 1950 that federal aid policies were formalized.

Chapter 1 examines the formation and evolution of government policies regarding disaster management. In 1950, Congress passed the Disaster Relief Act which was intended to help supplement the local and regional responses to natural and other disasters. This Act was the forerunner of many other disaster-related government actions, including the enacting of the National Flood Insurance Act and the creation of FEMA. While all relief is supposed to be supplemental to state and local government, Platt argues that federal aid has quickly become the primary actor in relief. He also argues that the decision of when to declare federal emergencies – a decision made by the President – is often politicized. The chapter cites a sharp increase in the number of disasters declared by both President G.H.W. Bush and by President Clinton while they were seeking reelection.

Several other problems with the current system are emphasized, including an imprecise method for approving events as disasters, and a pattern of paying out money for disasters that occurred years ago. The cost and number of approved disasters are rising rapidly, and there is little political action to keep them in check. Further, there is no systematic method to calculate total disaster costs, especially including those costs incurred by supplemental programs like the National Flood Insurance Program and the USDA's disaster relief programs.

The Chapter finishes with an examination of federal relief's effect on moral hazard, or the willingness to take more risk when you know an outside party will compensate you for loss. Platt argues that because the government covers those losses that occur during a disaster, people are more likely to build and live in hazard-prone areas. He even suggests that government payouts may be responsible for increased rebuilding of areas already hit by a disaster once. The rest of the book apparently explores this subject in more detail.

One thing that struck me while reading this chapter was the author's high cynicism about our government's motives. Certainly, politics do play a part in determining where to declare disasters, but I imagine that the federal government is mostly responding to a perceived cry for help. The suddenness and severity of natural disasters make them much more difficult to ignore than more chronic social problems such as poverty. Also, while I agree that the government's willingness to pay has some impact on people choosing hazardous building locations, I think that most people do so out of necessity, vanity, and a belief that nothing truly bad will ever happen to them. But I grew up in a house that hangs off an ocean-side cliff and looks out over the San Andreas Fault, so I may be a little biased.