

The Performance of FEMA as a Standalone Agency and Within DHS

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In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks the Department of Homeland Security was established as a single cabinet-level organization combining 22 existing federal agencies with responsibilities for protecting the United States homeland. Conceptually, combining individual agencies into a single department was intended to result in improved accountability, information-sharing, and a unified command structure. However, considering that many of the 22 existing agencies had dissimilar missions, establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) failed to adequately address various issues that were critical for the successful response to crisis events. In particular, since the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was established in 1979 through an executive order by President Jimmy Carter, the agency had been tasked with coordinating the federal government response to both natural and manmade disasters within the United States. This disaster response mission of FEMA was now seemingly at odds with the primary DHS emphasis on protecting the United States from terrorist attacks. More specifically, by burying the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within layers of a larger bureaucracy, FEMA's primary mission of disaster response was altered to the degree that the agency ostensibly became another cog in the DHS wheel focused on defending the American homeland from terrorist attack. Accordingly, this research study examines FEMA before and after incorporation into DHS with a focus on organizational leadership and disaster response efforts within the United States to address the following question: *Has incorporation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) adversely impacted the federal government response effort for natural disasters within the United States to the degree that FEMA should be removed from the purview of DHS and reestablished as a standalone agency?*

### **Literature Review**

Determining the proper function of government has been a topic of debate since the First Continental Congress convened in 1774 and the subsequent United States Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress in 1776. By the early twenty-first century, the national debate has resulted in a consensus that the protection of American citizens in modern society is a core government function (Frieden, 2013; Stahn, 2007). In this context, the government as a whole plays a crucial role in responding to both natural and manmade disasters, despite an inherent difficulty of the general public to understand the exact relationship and specific responsibilities of various agencies at the local, state and federal level (Birkland & Waterman, 2008; Col, 2007; Waugh, 1994). Further complicating the basic comprehension of the government disaster response efforts is the Constitutional principle of federalism which provides that local and state governments have both the authority and autonomy to manage their affairs (Birkland & Waterman, 2008).

The United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established with a mission focus on ensuring that the United States is protected from terrorist events and other hazards. In practical application, DHS provides the United States with a means of enhancing the response to domestic incidents by establishing a single, comprehensive management system (Bush, 2003). Specific to natural and manmade disasters, the DHS response is coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) which manages incidents at the lowest jurisdictional level with the lead response role initially accomplished by state and local authorities (Robertson, 2017). However, as FEMA policies evolved, it became readily apparent that the principles of federalism made the already challenging task of disaster response all the more difficult (Scavo, Kearney, & Kilroy, 2007).

### **Origin of the Federal Government Response to Disasters**

From a historical perspective, efforts by the federal government to address challenges to national security and provide for the protection of the American public has been more reactive than proactive (Cutter, Ahearn, & Galloway, 2013). This posture began to change during the mid-twentieth century as federal response efforts evolved from an ad hoc response strategy into today's integrated strategy for disaster preparedness, mitigation, and response. Accordingly, the current goal of federal disaster response efforts is to understand, prepare, and manage incidents in a manner that minimizes risk to the public and enhances the recovery effort within impacted regions of the United States (Bosomworth, Owen, & Curnin, 2016; Garrett, 2016). However, this modern concept of professional emergency management has not always been the case (Petak, 1985).

Organized emergency preparedness efforts at the federal level in the United States were rooted in civil defense efforts of the mid-twentieth century. The Office of Civilian Defense was created by a 1941 Presidential Executive Order to plan for protection of the civilian population in the event of a nuclear attack (Falk, 1964; Sander, 1972). Subsequently, in 1950 passage of the Federal Civil Defense Act provided comprehensive legislation to facilitate emergency planning. While the Act was predominantly focused on the Cold War preparation of an enemy attack, it also included a component to advise the president on policy development for coordinating emergency preparedness efforts by over 100 federal agencies (Brown, 1988; Kreps, 1990). However, it would ultimately be the planning elements rooted in civil defense and Cold War preparations for protecting United States citizens and property that would provide a political framework and mission for creating the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate disaster response efforts (Davies, 2017).

**Establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**

In response to a series of hurricanes and earthquakes during the 1960s and early 1970s, in 1974 Congress began to focus more on disaster response with passage of the Disaster Relief Act. Nevertheless, emergency management at the federal level continued to be criticized for being disorganized and spread across more than 100 agencies (McLoughlin, 1985). As such, with state and local governments becoming increasingly frustrated with coordination of disaster response at the federal level, the National Governor's Association recommended the establishment of a single federal agency responsible for the management of natural, manmade, and attack emergencies (Mushkatel & Weschler, 1985). Shortly thereafter in 1979, President Carter issued an Executive Order establishing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to focus on improving the federal disaster response preparations as well as overseeing the nation's civil defense efforts (Kapucu & Yuldashev, 2011).

Establishment of FEMA combined over 100 programs and numerous federal agencies with varying responsibilities for emergency response into a single agency. The laborious task of integrating diverse organizations with different structures, operations, and policies into a single agency was made all the more difficult as the result of disagreements as to which federal department would house FEMA and the need to appoint a director with strong leadership qualities as well as professional emergency management experience (Perrow, 2005). To further complicate the issue, President Carter had created FEMA by Executive Order which resulted in less statutory guidance than if the agency had been established by legislative action (Ornstein & Mann, 2006). As such, FEMA was required to answer to over 23 Congressional committees which had oversight over various aspects of the federal emergency management processes (Ornstein & Mann, 2006).

**Evolution of FEMA as an Independent Agency (1979–2003)**

From the inception of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) until shortly after the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, FEMA operated as an independent agency. During this period, consistent with the American system of federalism, state and local governments continued to handle the response to most disasters with FEMA predominantly serving to coordinate state requests for federal assistance (Birkland & Waterman, 2008; Dynes, 1992; Garrett & Sobel, 2003). However, the degree of involvement by FEMA for disaster management would vary as the result of changes in mission focus and leadership structure as new FEMA Directors were appointed during each presidential administration (Krause & Cohen, 2000; Howell & Lewis, 2002; Johnson, 2009; Maranto, 1998; Mycoff, 2007; Neto, 2006).

**Presidents Carter and Reagan.** After appointment by President Carter, the first FEMA Director John Macy struggled to establish a new organizational culture and atmosphere of cooperation amid differing agencies with previous compartmentalized responsibilities. As President Reagan assumed office in 1980 and appointed Louis Giuffrida as Director of FEMA, the focus of federal emergency management efforts was redirected towards preparing for a Soviet nuclear attack (Kapucu & Yuldashev, 2011). This focus was made all the more noteworthy by the relative absence of natural disasters during the eight-year Reagan presidency which resulted in the response capabilities of FEMA being largely untested. Further, by the end of President Reagan's two terms in office, there had been ten directors during the eleven-year existence of FEMA. From a management perspective, the frequent replacement of senior leaders and changes in mission focus has a disruptive impact on the ability of an organization to function productively (Ingraham, 1987; Thomas, 1988).

**President George H.W. Bush.** The administration of President George H.W. Bush began within months after passage of the Stafford Act in November of 1988 which encouraged hazard mitigation and delineated a process for disaster declarations by the president that would allow federal agencies to assist states overwhelmed by adverse events (Birkland & Waterman, 2008). Nevertheless, during the term of President George H.W. Bush disaster response efforts would continue to languish (Sylves, 1994). So much so that Congress considered dismantling FEMA in 1992 after failed response efforts to Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew (Waugh & Streib, 2006). However, shortly after President Bush left office a General Accounting Office Report to Congress would exonerate FEMA to some degree by identifying inadequacies in the federal response strategy that prevented federal agencies from initiating preparatory activities when a threat of disaster is imminent (Mener, 2007).

**President Clinton.** As President Clinton assumed office, James Lee Witt was appointed as the Director of FEMA and the position elevated to the Cabinet-level (Gerber and Cohen 2008). Of additional significance, Witt became the first FEMA Director who had credentials as an experienced emergency management professional (Kettl, 2000). Under the guidance of Director Witt, the FEMA mission was revised to deemphasize civil defense and provide a greater focus on an all-hazards response strategy while assuming a proactive posture for preventing damage from disasters (Sylves, 1994). This new approach proved to be successful as FEMA effectively responded to a series of natural disasters and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. The turnaround of FEMA under the leadership of Director Witt exemplified the difference that an experienced senior political official can make in a position where the average tenure had been less than two years (Wamsley & Schroeder, 1996). However, the new FEMA mission focus, experienced leadership, and enhanced reputation would be short-lived.

**President George W. Bush.** The history of inexperienced leadership within FEMA resumed when President George W. Bush appointed his campaign manager Joe Allbaugh as the Director of FEMA. More significantly, Vice President Dick Cheney was assigned to oversee the process of integrating the nation's plans for responding to an attack on American soil with the creation of an Office of National Preparedness within FEMA (Goldstein, 2010). From a practical perspective, incorporating national preparedness for an attack aligned with the FEMA all-hazards emergency management philosophy for responding to various types of natural and manmade disasters. From a political perspective, in February 2001 the United States Commission on National Security recommended including the Federal Emergency Management Agency as an integral component in the establishment of a new independent Homeland Security Agency (Tainter, & Taylor, 2013).

After the September 11th terror attacks, national attention focused on the fight against terrorism and the correlation with emergency preparedness activities. However, as a standalone agency, in 2001 FEMA was ill prepared to address a catastrophic natural disaster and other national security threats such as a terrorist attack (Kapucu, Arslan, & Collins, 2010; Waugh & Sylves, 2002). As such, less than two weeks following September 11, 2001, President Bush created the White House Office of Homeland Security to oversee and coordinate the national strategy to safeguard the United States against future terrorist attacks (Wise, 2002). Shortly thereafter, in the largest federal government reorganization since the creation of the Department of Defense in 1947, passage of the 2002 Homeland Security Act transferred the Federal Emergency Management Agency into the Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate of the newly created Department of Homeland Security (Haynes, 2004; May, Jochim, & Sapotichne, 2011).



**FEMA as a Component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)**

The rationale for moving the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was to provide a more effective response to both natural and manmade disasters. However, FEMA was now a very small part of the newly created DHS which was intent upon preventing future terrorist acts (Kahan, 2015). This diminished role of FEMA was underscored by President George W. Bush with the diversion of funding to other agencies and appointment of another FEMA Director with no prior emergency management experience (Parker & Brown, 2009). As such, FEMA experienced a loss of mission focus that adversely impacted the agency's efforts for disaster mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery (Lin, 2006).

The process of restructuring any organization often creates new issues that were as bad or worse than the ones attempting to be solved (Peters, 1992). In the case of FEMA, restructuring combined over 100 federal disaster-response programs reporting to 20 different congressional agencies into a newly created department. The inherent complexity of this restructuring effort was made all the more difficult in consideration that the upper echelon of FEMA was predominantly comprised of political appointees entrenched in isolated divisions with competing, if not sometimes conflicting, priorities (Jo & Rothenberg, 2011). More significantly, the DHS primary focus on preventing terrorist acts adversely impacted the federal emergency management structure needed for responding to natural disasters (Birkland & Waterman, 2008). However, there is a persuasive argument to be made that the inconsistent and often criticized performance of FEMA is not the result of an inability to function within a larger organization, but rather the result of a continuous change in mission focus, inexperienced senior leadership, and a politicized environment (Kahan, 2015).

By almost any measure the response by FEMA to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was considered to be a significant failure and criticism of the federal efforts were rampant (Dreier, 2006; Menzel, 2006; Takeda & Helms, 2006; Wise, 2006). So much so that many members of Congress began to question whether political patronage and inexperienced FEMA leadership had contributed to poor federal disaster response efforts (Lewis, 2009; Wamsley & Schroeder, 1996). Ultimately, passage of the Post-Katrina Emergency Reform Act in 2006 would recommend over 300 changes in the federal emergency management effort including a reorganization of FEMA; changing the FEMA Director position to FEMA Administrator reporting directly to Secretary of Homeland Security; and classification of FEMA as a distinct entity within DHS (Birkland, 2009). Subsequently, in 2009 President Obama appointed a FEMA Administrator who had practical emergency management knowledge and experience. Now after more than a decade since Hurricane Katrina, the much-maligned Federal Emergency Management Agency has undergone numerous reforms and made great strides in improving federal emergency management efforts (Farazmand, 2007; White, 2017).

### **Discussion**

Based on frequent policy and organization changes, the evolution of FEMA gives the outward perception of a trial and error approach to emergency management at the federal level. Credence for this consideration is provided by legislation and executive orders that would typically be enacted in the aftermath of each failed disaster response to correct real or presumed problems. However, the fact that remediation actions were repeated after each disaster would suggest that the root cause of failed federal emergency management efforts was not necessarily the result of whether FEMA was a standalone agency or a part of DHS. Support for this assertion is readily apparent upon review of FEMA failures both before and after incorporation into DHS.

Despite the prevailing tendency to focus on failures in the FEMA disaster response effort, there have been periods of success which are often overlooked. Most notably, the period that FEMA was under the leadership of Director James Witt during the two-terms of President Clinton and Director Craig Fugate during the two-terms of President Obama. In addition to the stability of leadership during the eight-year span of each director, both Witt and Fugate were experienced in the field of emergency management prior to being appointed as the Director of FEMA. Conversely, the other eighteen FEMA Directors would serve in the position for less than two years and, to a greater extent, were not experienced in the coordination of emergency management activities. Accordingly, upon review of the periods that FEMA experienced both success and failure, it is apparent that political patronage associated with the appointment of inexperienced FEMA leadership contributed to the inadequacy of disaster response efforts.

An additional issue that adversely impacted the performance of FEMA is associated with organizational performance as the result of frequent mission changes from the time that the agency was initially established in 1979 through incorporation into DHS after passage of the 2002 Homeland Security Act. When any large organization undergoes significant reorganization efforts there will be an initial period of uncertainty where employees lose focus and do not necessarily understand how to achieve their new mission. In the case of FEMA, the frequent adaptations of the organizational mission also had the effect of interrupting the emergency management cycle of disaster mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery. Nevertheless, despite the predictability of an adverse performance impact as the result of reorganization and changes in mission focus, many members of Congress and the general public are more inclined to argue that the cause of inadequate disaster response efforts by FEMA are the result of relocating emergency management responsibilities into the Department of Homeland Security.

### **Conclusion and Implication for Future Research**

This research effort was focused on the performance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) before and after incorporation into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to answer the following question: *Has incorporation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) adversely impacted the federal government response effort for natural disasters within the United States to the degree that FEMA should be removed from the purview of DHS and reestablished as a standalone agency?* In exploring this issue, the literature review identified that repeated changes in mission focus and frequent upper echelon leadership changes have adversely impacted the ability of FEMA to realize its full long-term potential of creating an effective emergency management system. Conversely, during periods when FEMA was under the senior leadership of individuals with extensive emergency management experience, as evidenced by Director Witt and Director Fugate, there were notable and widely recognized improvements in the disaster response efforts by FEMA. An additional consideration is that these periods of improved performance by FEMA occurred in the years after creation in 1979 and reorganization in 2006 when the agency was allowed to develop as an organization and establish an effective emergency management culture. Accordingly, based on the rationale discussed above, the conclusion of this research study is that FEMA should remain within DHS in consideration that removal would result in a new period of organizational instability resulting in a potential adverse impact on the federal emergency management effort for disaster mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery. This examination of FEMA performance also identified that future research efforts should focus on the need for requiring that individuals appointed to senior leadership positions within FEMA possess a significant level of emergency management knowledge and experience.

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