

November 29, 2005

A Better Approach to Hurricane Recovery

By Forest Thigpen and J. Robert McClure III

Mississippians used to joke that their state's two largest cities were Memphis and New Orleans. When your own largest city – state capital Jackson, with fewer than 200,000 residents – isn't even among America's 100 largest cities, you tend to resign yourself to being overshadowed by your big bluesy neighbors.

Even so, the media's incessant post-Katrina obsession with Louisiana's problems has diverted attention from Mississippi's courageous response to the storm – and from the lingering effects of the four major storms that battered Florida in 2004.

You've seen Mississippi's devastation. Hurricane damage there was arguably more severe and demonstrably more widespread than in the Big Easy. (Manmade damage is another matter.) The estimated 35-foot storm surge along the coast wasn't merely rising water, as in New Orleans; it was a relentless battering ram against the structures near the coast, and a briny-water destructive force for miles inland.

Near the coast, two major bridges 50 miles apart were lifted off their bases and dumped into the water. In Biloxi, 5,000 of the 25,000 structures are gone, and many more will be condemned as unfit for habitation. Even in Laurel, 100 miles inland, more than half the buildings were severely damaged or totally destroyed.

You've also probably seen the endless reports depicting how officials in Louisiana prepared and responded – or didn't. What a contrast with Mississippi's preparations and response, which resembled Florida's 2004 experience enduring four major hurricanes.

Well before Katrina hit, Gov. Haley Barbour urged people to leave Mississippi's Gulf Coast, and he acted promptly to reverse the traffic flow on the interstate highways to speed the evacuation. He also announced that he'd ordered all law enforcement officers to "deal with looters ruthlessly."

After the storm, Governor Barbour spent many hours reassuring storm victims in person, but he also spent time each day making calls to secure private donations of badly needed relief supplies. He knows a few people in government, too, and called them as well, including Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.

You haven't heard many complaints from Mississippi about the federal response because there haven't been many. The prevailing attitude is, "Why be mad at the feds for not helping us? It's not their job. It's ours." As a Pascagoula official noted, "Outside help is nice, and we appreciate it. But we don't want to depend on it."

Mississippi's prevailing attitude echoes that of Florida, which was pounded by four

major hurricanes in 2004. Florida never descended into the chaos that beset Louisiana. One reason was preparation. Although thousands of elderly Floridians reside in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities – including some on low-lying barrier islands – all of the vulnerable were safely evacuated.

Moreover, after these storms passed, there was never a serious breakdown in law and order – in Mississippi or Florida. Neither was there constant whining about the federal response. Neighbors took care of each other, and churches were quick to respond to those who needed food and water. The feds aren't supposed to be the first government responders; the state and local governments are, and in Mississippi and Florida they did their job.

Mississippi and Florida responded to adversity the way many families would. Families help each other, as Florida did this year by aiding Mississippi, which had sent aid to Florida in 2004. Most people who help each other like families don't expect the government to do what families are supposed to do.

This generous spirit gives us hope that these disasters can truly bring a turnabout in the way we think of ourselves and the role we expect government to play. We hope that the people's response in these unusual times will remind us of the way things ought to be in the normal times.

Because many of Mississippi's storm-ravaged communities have no tax base left, for instance, it's a good time to ponder the core functions of government -- those things government *should* do – and to consider possible alternatives to government financing of public structures.

If the recovery effort is handled correctly, then years from now when people think of this disaster, they won't think of how a hurricane's winds brought widespread destruction, but how freedom's

winds brought hope and opportunity to Mississippi in 2005 and swept across the land to other states as well.

Forest Thigpen is President of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy. J. Robert McClure III is President and CEO of The James Madison Institute. Both are non-partisan policy centers based in their respective state capitals.

As a 501(c)(3) organization, The James Madison Institute does not support, endorse, or oppose candidates or proposed legislation. For more information, visit <http://www.jamesmadison.org>.

CONTACT: Matt Warner (850) 383-4633 matt@jamesmadison.org