

Title:

The Math of the Aftermath

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1161

Summary:

The latest natural disasters may not still be the latest news. To those who were affected by them, though, the aftermath is much more than a headline. These are stories that we cannot push to the back pages or the backs of our minds.

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Article Body:

Comedian Chevy Chase, when he anchored the first Saturday Night Live faux-news desk, had a running joke that satirized, post-mortem, the endless medical updates provided by the public relations machine of a dying dictator ...

"Here's a bulletin from Spain: Doctors are reporting that Generalissimo Francisco Franco is holding fast in his valiant fight to remain dead!"

The point, of course, was that neither the Spanish public nor the global public at the time was ever fooled by the propaganda of Franco's terminal condition during his last days. The tweak also carried undertones that no government could overcome the forces of nature, no matter what it announced.

That brings us to the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Anyone who has been to the Gulf Coast says that the media images of the devastation there --- no matter how hard they try --- just cannot convey the scope of the disaster. Vast segments of the region have literally been blown back a couple of centuries, to a time when electricity, telephones, running water and the like were either a luxury or a futuristic concept. Usual conveniences such as food shopping are still a major challenge to many. Some jobs may have left with Katrina; like her, they may never return.

This doesn't look like it's going to get much better anytime soon, either.

I thought of this while taking a second look at the pages on the Longer Life

site, all of which include the American Red Cross public service ad which appeals for donations to their hurricane relief fund. The appeals are just as urgent and relevant today as they were when they were first posted. I sometimes wonder, though, if those who view them don't get so accustomed to their presence that they ultimately look past them. I know the plan at the Longer Life site is to keep them in place until all needs are met, which in my opinion, means the Red Cross will be a fixture on their pages for a long time to come.

The American government recently released over 100,000 pages of documents which dealt with their handling of the crisis. It's notable in the impression that they didn't give the matter much more attention than they would have if the affected area was a third-world country. Having said that, the sheer volume of funds required to repair and rebuild is staggering.

For example, it's been cited in the Los Angeles Times that the costliest public works project to date was the shift of freeways in Boston to an underground route. The price tag was \$14.6 billion, the time factor was 14 years and the object of the exercise was to move just under eight miles of roadway into a tunnel.

The Gulf Coast reclamation is going to involve much more than eight miles of tunneling.

It's been reported that the federal commitment to this task has already exceeded \$62 billion. One third of that amount has already been deployed and it can fairly be said that its effects are hardly noticed. This total will be added to the federal deficit, of course, right along with the billions being spent to do whatever it is they currently say they're doing in Iraq. If the current administration holds fast to its pledge against raising taxes, the implication is that a host of cuts in other programs are inevitable.

Thus, Americans won't have to be located along the Gulf Coast to somehow share in its devastation. Among other things, some interest groups are now taking a close look at how funds are being utilized and allocated. Allegations of misappropriations and the like are sure to follow.

Contrast this state of affairs with the recent earthquake in Pakistan. The magnitude of that disaster was similarly breathtaking. If you missed it, the Richter scale measured the quake at 7.8 and an estimated 87,000 people were killed. Their government already depends upon the USA for much of its additional aid. It may be a while before they see anything significant to assist in this natural tragedy.

One city there will have additional help. It's coming in the form of lottery

winnings. A gentleman named Ishan Khan hit it big while working in the USA as a taxi driver. He nailed a \$55 million jackpot and took his winnings up front, netting over \$32 million. Mr Khan moved back to his homeland, where that amount of money can spend like \$1 billion and where he instantly became one of Pakistan's most wealthy private individuals.

It's obvious to Mr Khan that private assistance is necessary for relief efforts there to have any immediacy. His village, Batagram, lost 4500 citizens in the 8 Oct quake and surely, a good number of those were known to him. Here's the Associated Press account of his response to date:

"Just days before the earthquake, Khan was elected district nazim, or mayor, of Batagram. After the quake hit, he helped pull survivors from the rubble, and paid to get the most seriously injured to regional hospitals. He told pharmacists he would pay them later for dispensing all the medicine on their shelves. The bill came to 10 million rupees, almost \$200,000.

"Khan has bankrolled a program to supply roofing materials to rebuild shattered homes. He bought 150 tents, some of which occupy land just outside his mansion with panoramic views of snowcapped peaks.

"Most important, Khan has emerged as a colorful and outspoken critic of local government corruption. In recent days, the blue-eyed nazim – who refers to himself simply as Khan – has dismissed the town's police chief and fired another official. Khan promises to continue the housecleaning. 'We have a calamity and people are lazy, unable to move,' he says. 'So I started firing people.'

"Relief workers are impressed. 'He's a take-charge person,' says Aziuddin Ahmad, who works with a Malaysian aid group."

With that record, I'm sure there would be a good number of towns along the Gulf Coast that would elect him to public office, too.

With so much money required, both public accountability and private incentive are imperative if the effects of these disasters are to be overcome. Let's hope that interest groups in both the USA and Pakistan monitor the former closely and with the greater good in mind.

Meanwhile, let's not let those Red Cross ads blend into the background. As Mr Khan has exemplified, there is no more effective actions than those taken by personal incentive. Do whatever you can do to make sure your governmental representatives understand that accountability in dispersing relief funds is important to taxpayers and can shear years from the completion date of

reclamation projects. More directly, anytime --- now or whenever, as this effort is going to take years to accomplish --- you have a bit of funds to spare, forsake the costs of a night on the town or its equivalent and click on the Red Cross ad.

Perhaps your donation won't come from winning the lottery, but the knowledge that you've helped a disaster victim in need will make it feel like you did.