

The Long View : The History of U.S. Emergency Management since 1900

**Claire B. Rubin
President, Claire B. Rubin & Associates,
Disaster Research and Consulting,
P. O. Box 2208
Arlington, VA**

**www.clairerubin.com
www.disasterbookstore.com**

The Long View of U.S. Emergency Management

- Evolution of emergency management in the U.S. during the past 110 years occurred in three stages:
 - 1900 – 1950
 - 1950 – 2000
 - 2000 – 2010
- Key Questions:
 - When and why did emergency management become an essential service to be provided by local, state, and federal governments?
 - How has the military been involved over the decades?

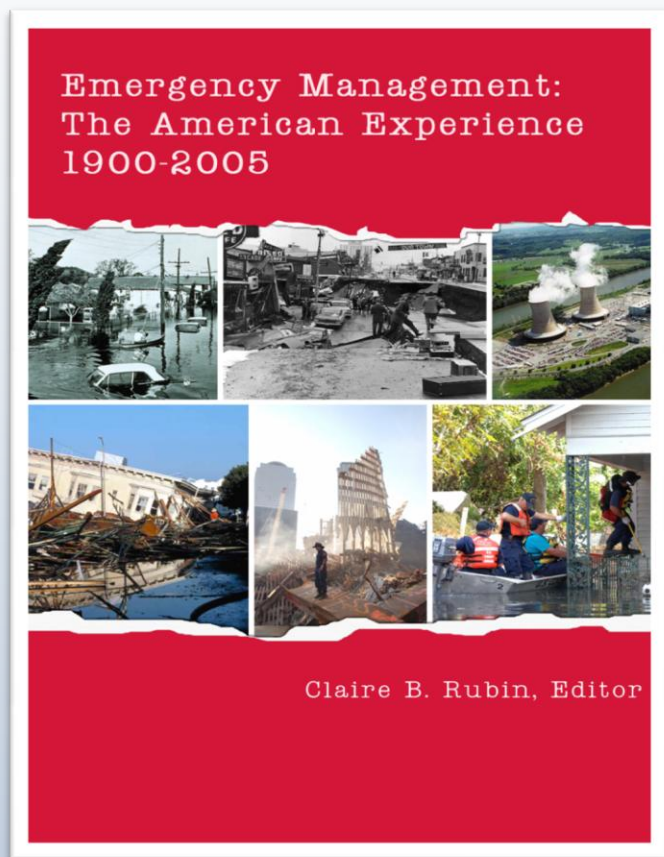
Why Study History?

- History has been characterized as ODTAA – “one damn thing after another” Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (2011)
- Why the history of Emergency Management is important:
 - We need context, in order to interpret events, problems, issues
 - We need to document and learn from our own experiences and those of others to avoid fatal mistakes
 - “Some surprises will become disasters and some disasters will provide surprises.” (Prof. Ken Mitchell, Rutgers Univ.)

Why Focus on the History of E.M. in the U.S.?

- When many years have elapsed since a major disaster, the general public and elected officials sometimes forget that emergency services are an essential function, even when they are not in public view
- Consequently, these services may be reduced or cut out completely to address more immediate needs such as budget crunches, leaving the community ill-prepared to respond and recover from the next big disaster
- Focusing on the history of EM reminds us to take the long-view. Two examples of the long-view of disasters:
 - The [Century Time Line](#) chart shows major national disasters for the past 10 decades
 - The [California Time Line](#) chart shows just the earthquake history in one state for 7 decades

The History of U.S. Emergency Management since 1900



“The one who does not remember history is bound to live through it again.”

George Santayana 2/2011

Scope of the Book

- Focuses on response experiences and organizations
- Highlights gradual public sector involvement, documenting the increasing role of the federal government since the 1950s
- Discusses disasters via case studies to illuminate:
 - Changes in public policies and public administration
 - Organizations formed in response to disasters
- Describes changes made over time that have shaped emergency management systems in place today
- Uses the conceptual framework of the Time Line charts as an organizing theme: causal relationships and reactive systems

What Questions does the Book Address?

- Why did the federal government get involved in emergency management?
- Why and how has the role of the federal government changed?
- What role should the federal government have in major disasters and catastrophes?

Key Observations

- U. S. disasters are often complex and tragic, but always fascinating
- EM is a relatively new professional field, one without an in-depth and comprehensive account of its origins, development, and reasons for being
- U.S. has always experienced disasters but not always had a sustained public sector involvement in EM; those capabilities evolved the hard way
- The federal government's involvement is relatively recent, and its dominance is quite recent

Types of Disasters Studied

➤ **Natural**

Floods, earthquakes, pandemic, hurricanes, storms, and the dust bowl

➤ **Man-Made/ Accidental**

Urban fires, explosions, hazardous materials releases, oil spills

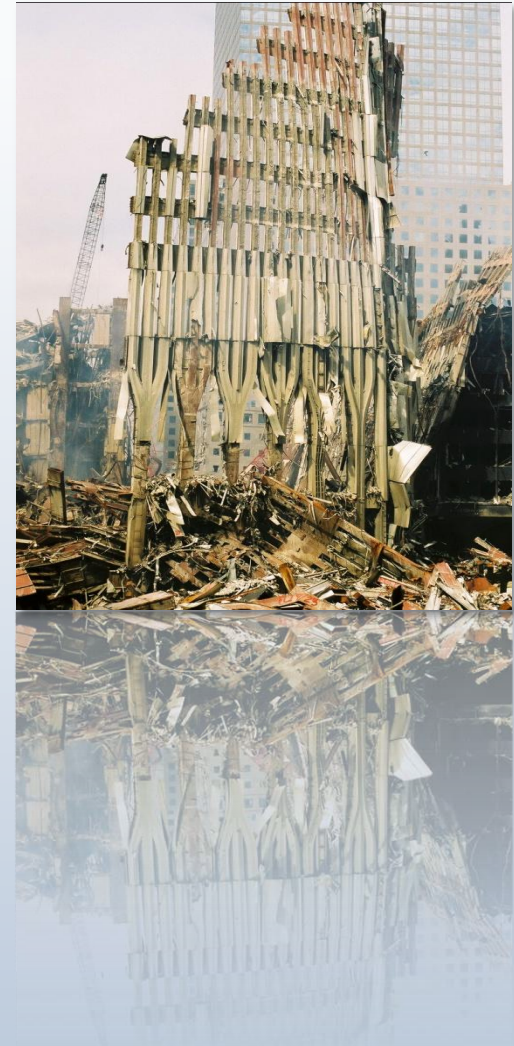
➤ **Man-Made/ Deliberate**

Sabotage, terrorism



Characteristics of Focusing Events

- Large Magnitude
- Unique Threat and/or Consequences
- High Visibility
- Unusual Location
- High Impact
- Surprise
- Received a Presidential Disaster Declaration (or eligible for one)



The Past:

First Half of 20th Century

➤ *From 1900-1950 –*

- Response to disasters viewed as a moral and ethical responsibility of neighbors, religious groups, and the community
- Gradually, local and state governments became increasingly involved (re: health and safety of citizens)
- Federal government's role was limited to **post-disaster** assistance; only **supplemented local and state efforts**
- Beginnings of scientific knowledge that could be applied to minimize effects (seismic safety, weather science)
- Role of the military

The Past:

Second Half of 20th Century

➤ *From 1950-1999—*

- Sharp growth in scientific knowledge (technical, social, behavioral sciences)
- Federal government became more involved in all phases of major disasters
- State/local governments and citizens rapidly increased their expectations of the federal role
- E.M. began to be regarded as the “quintessential” public service at all levels of government by citizens (Waugh, 2000)

The 21st Century: From 2000-2010

- In just first decade of 21st century, some huge and highly dramatic events occurred in all 3 categories of disasters:
 - *Man-made Deliberate:*
 - 9/11: worst terrorism event in U.S. history
 - *Natural:*
 - Hurricanes Katrina/Rita/Wilma: largest impact and most costly natural disasters to date
 - *Man-made Accidental:*
 - BP Oil Spill: largest and most costly domestic hazmat incident

The 21st Century, From 2000-2010, cont'd

- Response and recovery for the three sets of events varied greatly. Attitudes about E.M. and emergency managers changed drastically
- Many expectations for assistance during both response and recovery phases were not met
- Many issues are still unresolved. Various national frameworks, response, recovery, preparedness etc. still pending at FEMA

Evolving Role of Government

➤ *The 20th Century:*

- ***Government at all levels had a marginal role in EM prior to 1950. Their role grew gradually over the next 50 yrs.***
 - Response and recovery was conducted by disaster victims, their neighbors, religious groups, and civic communities
 - Little or no emphasis on mitigation, prevention, or preparedness

➤ *The 21st Century:*

- ***Government at all levels is heavily involved***
 - Response, recovery, mitigation, and preparedness are incorporated into “Comprehensive Emergency Management” and EM becomes a quintessential government service
 - Increasing but limited emphasis on mitigation and prevention

The Future: What's Ahead for E.M.?

- Disasters are likely to be bigger, more complex and costlier
- Global economy means more interdependence and secondary effects for U.S. from international disasters
- Need for more far-sighted, comprehensive, and strategic thinking about E.M.
- Need for training and education in risk management, decision science, management of complex systems
- Operating with economic, financial, and fiscal constraints

The Future: What's Needed in E.M.?

- Flexibility in interpretations, actions
- Acceptance of losses; triage for communities
- Macro level vision plus strategic thinking
- Ability to galvanize, motivate, inspire
- Effective use of new media and communications modes
- More research and utilization of existing research
- Better science and technology, basic and applied

New Edition



- Due out in Spring 2012
- Reviews past events and adds information for 2005 thru 2010
- Explains E.M. within the context of public administration
- Includes two new chapters:
 - **Chapter 8:** The System Is Tested: Response to the *BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*
 - **Chapter 10:** The Evolving Federal Role in Emergency Management – Policies and Processes

Speaker Informaton

- Claire B. Rubin (cbrubin@gmail.com)
- Speaker's websites:
 - www.clairerubin.com
 - www.disasterbookstore.com
 - www.disaster-timeline.com
 - <http://recoverydiva.com>