

Lyndon Johnson and Disaster Politics

Accused of inadequate presidential leadership in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, George W. Bush was measured by some pundits against a standard that his fellow Texan Lyndon B. Johnson had purportedly set some four decades earlier, in response to the *last* big hurricane to have struck New Orleans—Hurricane Betsy (see Remnick 2005; Williams 2005; Alpert 2012). Bush had seemed initially disengaged, had been slow to visit the scene, and when he did so had merely circled overhead in Air Force One, rather than experiencing the suffering first-hand. Johnson, by contrast, had touched down at Moisant airport within hours of Betsy, met its victims, and personally directed the federal response. When he acknowledged the shortcomings of his response in his memoir, *Decision Points*, even Bush seemed to acknowledge that LBJ's activist approach had constituted the *proper* presidential approach to disaster (Bush 2010, 309).

This article considers a related but broader question, namely the extent to which Johnson's tenure altered the federal approach to natural disaster politics more generally, and in particular the presidential role. Before the Great Society, indeed long before the 1960s, it had already been established that Washington had some role to play in responding to disaster, but it was normally of subsidiary importance: the principal responsibility usually lay with states and local governments, and with the American Red Cross (Davies 2017, forthcoming). Meanwhile, presidents generally had little to contribute: dealing with disaster was a largely bureaucratic task at the federal level, with the White House role—under the Federal Disaster Act of 1950 (PL 875)—confined largely to declaring the emergency sufficiently grave to justify agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Public Roads, and the Small Business Administration stepping in. There *were* occasions

when a president would choose to visit the scene of a disaster, but they were few, and came about not because of political pressure to do so but because he saw an opportunity to promote his larger political goals—the defense of voluntarism, in the case of Eisenhower and Hoover, for example, the extension of the Tennessee Valley Authority to other river systems, in the case of Truman (Davies 2015). John F. Kennedy, his mind set firmly upon foreign affairs, did not visit the scene of either of the two major disasters of his brief tenure—Hurricane Carla, which struck Texas in the fall of 1961, or the punishing Atlantic Nor’easter that crashed into the Mid Atlantic states some six months later.

Compare that to more recent times. First, the federal role in responding to disaster has increased enormously:

- the number of incidents judged to constitute ‘major’ disasters increased from about a dozen per year under Eisenhower to an annual figure of seventy under George W. Bush;
- federal spending on disaster doubled during the 1960s (in inflation-adjusted dollars), doubled again during the Nixon-Ford presidency, and experienced another vertiginous increase under Bill Clinton and Bush;
- whereas presidents during the early years of PL 875 used to turn down one-third of gubernatorial requests for disaster aid, by the early twenty-first century the figure had dropped to fourteen percent;
- the federal share of total disaster spending leapt from around six percent under Ike to nearly fifty percent under Nixon (Rubin 2012, 124-125; Dacy and Kunruether 1969, 32; Moss 2007, 327).

Second, modern presidents are expected to take personal charge when an especially large disaster strikes: visibly directing the federal response, and also providing empathetic, emotional leadership—channeling the grief that the affected community feels, providing consolation. Often, that entails visiting the scene, sometimes even following quite modest disasters: in 2007, George Bush visited Greenberg, Kansas, following a tornado that had killed eleven people (Healy 2008, 2); five years later, Barack Obama went to Colorado, following a series of wild fires (Nakamura 2012). Modern presidents confronted with disaster, says the political scientist Patrick Roberts (2010), are expected to perform the role of “responder-in-chief,” while a reporter for the *Washington Post* referred to Bush’s role as “consoler-in-chief,” following his visit to Blacksburg after a mass shooting at Virginia Tech (Fletcher 2007; also see Heim 2013). Providing such leadership can confer important political advantages on a president, as with Obama’s response to Hurricane Sandy, shortly before the 2012 election (see Cassidy 2012); failing to do so caused George W. Bush significant damage after Katrina (see McClellan 2008; Remnick 2015).¹

This article focuses on the first two years of Johnson’s presidency, from November 1963 to the fall of 1965. This is when the activist Great Society impulse was at its exuberant zenith, and when the president’s abundant energies were focused most intensively on domestic affairs, helping to create new federal responsibilities in a whole range of policy areas—antipoverty, health, criminal justice, minority rights, environmental protection, to name but a few.² And by coincidence this was also when the major natural disasters of his presidency were concentrated. In other periods,

¹ For good recent surveys of the Great Society’s impact, see Woods 2016; Zelizer 2015; Patterson 2012; Milkis and Mileur 2005.

unusual concentrations of disasters have sometimes yielded important changes in the nation's approach to disaster: an enhanced commitment to flood- and hurricane-protection after the disasters of the mid-1920s and mid-1950s, for example, or the enduring spike in federal disaster spending following a series of earthquakes, floods and hurricanes at the turn of the 1990s. Given the Great Society context, it would be surprising were this not also the case with the early Johnson presidency.

I begin by considering LBJ's response to the half-dozen or so disasters that reached his desk during the first eighteen months of his presidency. They include two—an earthquake in Alaska in March 1964, and a clutch of Midwestern tornadoes a year later—that were enormously destructive, and would clearly have called for some kind of presidential response even if the mid-century disaster politics regime described above remained firmly in place. The remainder, while traumatic and in some cases deadly for those immediately affected, were less obviously national events, and perhaps for that reason it may be especially instructive to see how Johnson chose to involve himself in the federal response. The essay closes by examining Johnson's response to Hurricane Betsy in rather more depth, inquiring whether it might plausibly be seen as marking a fundamental break, and even the origins of contemporary presidential disaster politics.

Part I: Before Betsy: Patterns of Continuity and Change

1.1: Ohio River Flood, March, 1964

A little less than four months into Johnson's presidency, extensive flooding hit both the Ohio River and a number of its tributaries, causing a dozen deaths, ruining farmland, and

inundating a number of medium-sized towns, including Zanesville and Athens, OH. The Red Cross established refugee centers in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, to care for some of the estimated 110,000 who had to flee their homes.³

Clearly this flood was a significant event for the Ohio River valley. At the same time, it never became much more than a regional news story: the devastation was modest in comparison to that caused in recent years by the 1962 Nor'easter, or by Hurricanes Carol, Diane and Connie during Eisenhower's presidency. Compared to those disasters, moreover, this one lacked drama and visual punch, especially since larger cities that had historically been highly vulnerable to flooding --Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville -- were largely spared. Reflecting all this, the *New York Times* relegated its main story on the flood to page 19. When Johnson learned of the flood, moreover, he was not looking for extra work. Feeling besieged, he had just told his secretary that "every little boy that knows how to use the telephone is calling this morning," instructing her not to put through any more non-urgent calls.⁴ What is more, his callers were not just "little boys;" rather, he had been hearing from his defense secretary, his national security advisor, and the CIA director, who were reporting the political turmoil engulfing Cyprus and Panama, and the deteriorating authority of the new government in South Vietnam (see Shreve and Johnson 2007, 183ff). Wrestling with all these headaches and more, Johnson nevertheless made a snap decision to squeeze in an aerial inspection of the Ohio Valley, covering 1,700 miles in five hours.

During research for a book on the history of American disaster responses since the early republic, I have come across no previous instance of a president visiting the scene of so comparatively modest a disaster. Already, it seems that he was adopting a new

³ *New York Times*, March 12, 1964, p.19; *Washington Post*, March 14, 1964, p. A1.

⁴ This is recorded in Johnson's Daily Diary for March 13, 1964, downloaded on Sept. 28, 2016 from www.lbjlibrary.org.

approach. What might his motivation have been? Certainly it was not that he was under external pressure to fly to the Ohio Valley: neither the *Congressional Record*, nor such media coverage as the flood prompted, nor the archival paper trail record any such entreaties. The key probably lies in the list of those who accompanied LBJ on Air Force One: the governors of Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia; the heads of the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Public Roads, the Small Business Administration, and the American Red Cross; reporters from the Associated Press and the *Washington Post*. And another clue may be the way that LBJ, touching down in Cincinnati to issue his only public statement on the flood, impetuously plunged into a boisterous crowd of well-wishers, pressing the flesh and signing autographs.

Writing up his story, AP's Frank Cormier, an experienced LBJ-watcher, was most struck by that last scene. It was, he noted, a campaign year, and Johnson gave every impression of being on the campaign trail. Perhaps it seemed that way to his fellow politicians too: it was surely significant that the one governor who failed to join the president was William Scranton of Pennsylvania, a possible GOP opponent in the forthcoming presidential race.⁵ At a time when the president was just starting to try to present himself as more than simply his fallen predecessor's legatee, to imprint his own political personality and program agenda ahead of the fall campaign, that is a plausible explanation. But it is likely that LBJ was governing as well as campaigning when he visited the flood scene. It was politically helpful for him to spend time on Air Force One with a group of influential Midwestern governors, at a time when he was reaching out in all possible directions to maximize his political standing, and when he needed all the political capital that he could muster in order to force an ambitious political agenda (most especially passage of a Civil

⁵ See Fredericksburg VA *Free-Lance Star*, March 14, 1964, p.1.

Rights Act and the war on poverty) through a Congress that John F. Kennedy had found frustratingly recalcitrant.

Partly, he could build that capital simply by allowing those governors to bask in his reflected glory, at a time when he enjoyed stratospheric popularity in the polls. At a more prosaic level, though, he could do them a real service by bringing them together with a group of federal officials who were so well-placed to help them not just in relation to the flood disaster, but more generally. Few governors would have passed up the opportunity to spend time with the chief engineer of the Army Corps of Engineers. And the same is probably true of the head of the Bureau of Public Roads, Rex Whitton. “Highways, boys!,” LBJ exclaimed to the governors, pointing out Whitton. “If you’re interested in highways, here you are.”⁶

How new was all this? Certainly, the style was distinctly Johnsonian: the informal idiom, the intense, close-up lobbying. But other presidents too had undertaken aerial flood inspection tours, albeit in response to much larger disasters— Truman done flown over the Missouri River valley in 1951, when floods inundated his home city of Kansas City, and Eisenhower had done inspected the damage wrought by Hurricane Diane on Pennsylvania and New York in 1955. And both presidents, like LBJ, had been motivated not just by the gravity of the disaster but by their sense that it gave them an opportunity to advance their larger governing agendas—the defense of traditional federalism and voluntary giving, in the case of Ike; the push to establish a Missouri Valley Authority in the case of his predecessor. This first presidential foray into disaster politics, then, was distinct, but not wholly so.

⁶ *Toledo Blade*, March 14, 1964, p.1.

Within weeks, however, LBJ was challenged by a vastly greater disaster, when the strongest earthquake in U.S. history rocked the new state of Alaska.

1.2: Alaska Earthquake, March, 1964

Johnson heard about the quake from his press secretary George Reedy. Because of the remote location, and with communications badly disrupted, there was initially little firm news about just what had happened. In that environment, sometimes wild rumors circulated: many thousands had died; tsunamis were headed not just for the West Coast but for the Gulf of Mexico; the tremblor was so vast as to have caused cities as far away as Houston to sink by several inches; the nation's defense readiness had been seriously undermined by damage to military infrastructure. Those stories soon subsided, but the reality was grim enough: 115 dead; 30 blocks of downtown Anchorage completely destroyed; nearly every harbor ruined (at a time when the state's economy was based on fishing, rather than oil); many small towns utterly wrecked; tsunami damage to the coasts of Oregon and northern California. Where the Ohio floods had barely been noticed outside of the affected region, this earthquake was probably the most dramatic natural disaster to have struck the United States since the New England hurricane of 1938, and it received saturation coverage.

Quite apart from the enormous scale of damage, which ruined an estimated sixty percent of the state economy, Alaska had entered the union just five years earlier, had fewer than 250,000 inhabitants, and – as one aide told Johnson – had “a very weak state government that just doesn't have the tools and the skills and the expertise that other

states have.”⁷ Even before the disaster, it had been heavily dependent upon the federal government for support: Washington largely funded its schools, its public housing, its roads, its police force. In those circumstances, it was inescapably the Johnson Administration’s job to not just support the recovery effort, as the federal government normally did, but to lead and direct it.

This, it might seem, was a moment made for the dynamic, crusading New Dealer who occupied the White House in 1964, and who was now striving with such extraordinary energy to escape the long shadow of his martyred predecessor, not least by reaching out to liberals (“the Harvards”) who viewed the rough-hewn Texan with such cultural and ideological suspicion, or even contempt.⁸ In the first instance, though, Johnson’s response to the Alaska earthquake was a surprising one: far from placing himself in a position of conspicuous leadership, he stayed in the background; rather than visit the scene, he stayed on his ranch, where he had retreated for the long Easter weekend; instead of embracing panicky demands for relief, he emphasized the need to find out exactly what had happened before developing a federal response.

That Johnson was *able* to adopt this approach illustrates how distant the nation still was from contemporary expectations of presidential disaster politics. Although one reporter asked him whether he intended to visit the scene of the disaster, in the spring of 1964 LBJ could get away with a simple, monosyllabic negative: no reporter followed up, no one criticized him, no one asked him why not. That he did not *wish* to visit Alaska reflected

⁷ This was Kermit Gordon, director of the Bureau of the Budget, in conversation with Johnson on March 31. See Shreve and Johnson 2007, 608.

⁸ For an amusing account of Johnson’s extraordinarily frenetic pace at this time, see Reston 1964, B10. Reston presents LBJ’s explosive force as being equivalent to that of the recent quake.⁹ The Senate’s rules permit unlimited debate that at this time could only be ended by a ‘cloture’ vote, supported by two-thirds of the full membership of the Senate.

his larger political calculus, at a time when the Senate had just started what promised to be an exhausting and fractious debate over civil rights. Success in that legislative fight depended on preventing extraneous issues from interrupting Senate discussion until ‘cloture’ had been voted, meaning that a congressional debate over Alaska aid had to be avoided at all costs.⁹ Opponents of civil rights, Johnson lectured his budget director, would like nothing better than to shift the conversation to disaster relief, for “in the name of taking care of Alaska, they could also kill this civil rights bill awful easy” (Shreve and Johnson 2007, March 30, 1964, 583).

At the same time, Johnson fully recognized the magnitude of the catastrophe that had befallen Alaska, and the unprecedented degree to which the task of alleviating it must fall to the federal government. To judge from his daily diary and the phone conversations that he recorded, responding to that challenge occupied much of his time during the first week after the quake—where he had been cosmetically involved in the response to the Ohio River flood, here he was substantively so, shaping the federal response to an unusual way.

In part, that took the form of parliamentary legerdemain—he managed to slip \$50 million in stop-gap funds into the federal budget without triggering the two-hour maximum debate that would kill off civil rights in the Senate.¹⁰ Much more important, though, indeed arguably representing Johnson’s most original contribution to disaster politics, was his establishment of a cabinet committee to think strategically about the long-term future of

⁹ The Senate’s rules permit unlimited debate that at this time could only be ended by a ‘cloture’ vote, supported by two-thirds of the full membership of the Senate.

¹⁰ This required personal lobbying of the Democratic and minority leadership in each house. See, in particular, his conversation with the staunchly conservative House minority leader, Charles Halleck (R-Ind.). When Halleck remarked that he preferred \$50 million in loans to grants, LBJ pointedly reminded him of the grants that his own state had recently received following the Ohio flood. See call to Halleck (who was enjoying a fishing vacation in Florida), April 1, 1964, in Shreve and Johnson 2007, 626-27.

the state--the Federal Reconstruction and Development Planning Commission for Alaska. Its task was formidable. How should the nation approach the massive task of restoring the harbors, water and sewerage systems, pipelines, roads, downtowns, and government buildings that had been wrecked by the quake? What should be done about a town such as Valdez, where essentially nothing was left, and where the ground was severely buckled? And how were these vast challenges to be met in a state that had only a five month construction season?

When federal officials made their initial inspection tour of Alaska, there was a widespread feeling among engineers and public officials that these problems were insuperable, at least in the short and medium term, and that the state might have to be largely evacuated (Ink 2008, 75). In the event, though, Alaska bounced back astonishingly quickly. Two years on, personal income was fifteen percent higher than before the disaster, bank deposits thirty percent greater. What is more, LBJ celebrated signs that a new and more robust Alaskan economy was emerging, with her mineral, oil and forestry wealth being exploited to a much greater degree. Unemployment, which had been higher than the national average in 1964, was now being reduced.¹¹

Lyndon Johnson, for all his talents, has rarely been complimented for administrative finesse. In establishing this cabinet committee, though, and in persuading his ally Senator Clinton Anderson to chair it, he appears to have made an important contribution to the recovery of Alaska.¹² That, at least, is the view of the committee's executive director,

¹¹ See *Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 1966, A6.

¹² I rely here on Wohlforth 2014, and on Committee on the Alaska Earthquake, *The Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1970), Part III, 149-244, featuring short articles by members of the committee.¹³ Ink was a senior civil servant who served every president from Eisenhower to Reagan in a range of executive capacities. In 1964 he was working for the Bureau of the Budget.

Dwight Ink.¹³ Asked in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to reflect on how the Johnson Administration had handled the Alaska quake, Ink gave LBJ rave reviews. In particular, the unorthodox composition of the commission—a cabinet committee, chaired by a legislator—had two big advantages: Anderson’s involvement alleviated unease on Capitol Hill about being cut out of the Alaska recovery debate; and both Anderson and Ink had the ear of the President, something that forced busy, distracted cabinet colleagues to prioritize this enormous challenge, and to work closely together. Interviewed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Ink drew a sharp contrast:

The president said that this is a case of saving a state, and it has to be done. So even though people said it was impossible, it had to be done...But, you know, the way we operated it was absolutely the opposite of how they are approached today...Instead of having a complicated Department of Homeland Security, we went in the opposite direction, and that was to rely upon existing organizational structures, and instead of building elaborate superstructures, simplified existing systems and structures. And we relied upon the authority of the involved agencies and departments, and since I reported to the President and to the cabinet and to Senator Anderson I could draw on any department.....We had all kinds of leverage.¹⁴

What did all this yield in policy terms? On the one hand, the direct and business-like Anderson bluntly faced down some of the more extravagant requests for federal aid, including one to provide subsidized, retrospective earthquake insurance to individual victims. On the other hand, the commission’s legislative recommendations, published

¹³ Ink was a senior civil servant who served every president from Eisenhower to Reagan in a range of executive capacities. In 1964 he was working for the Bureau of the Budget.

¹⁴ The source is an interview conducted by the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s College of Public Affairs and Community Service, as part of a series called “Public Service Stories”, downloaded on Sept. 29, 2016 from www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDZuxGLxNo8.

shortly after the Senate had voted to end debate on the civil rights bill, were in other respects unprecedentedly generous, especially in their endorsing federal aid to individuals. Traditionally, federal aid had been confined largely to infrastructural support, while relief for individual disaster victims had been seen as a job for subnational governments and, especially, the Red Cross). Now, that changed. In particular, the Anderson commission focussed on the plight of heavily mortgaged Alaskans who, having lost their property in the earthquake, now faced the prospect of financing rebuilding on top of their still-outstanding debt. Responding to their plight, the commission broke new ground by introducing an element of debt-forgiveness into loans by the Veterans Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, and the Farmers Home Administration.

Despite Dwight Ink's plaudits, the administrative precedent that Johnson established in creating the Anderson commission has not been followed by any of his successors. Whether that is to be regretted, as Ink clearly believes, is an interesting question that, however, lies beyond the scope of the present essay.¹⁵ Either way, it is not surprising that LBJ's administrative lead has not been followed by his successors, even in other truly exceptional emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina. In organizational terms, after all, the overall trajectory since the 1950s has been toward an approach based on standardized procedures and specialist expertise, with the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Administration during the Carter Administration just one element in that broader pattern.

¹⁵ I have found the work of Patrick Roberts to be especially helpful in relation to recent administrative approaches to disaster management. One of his themes is the baleful effect of bureaucratic rigidity. See Roberts 2013; 2014.¹⁶ Recorded telephone call to Mansfield, June 11, 1964, phone number WH 6406.06 PNO 13, downloaded from website of the Miller Center of Public Affairs (www.millercenter.org) on Sept. 29, 2016.

Conversely, the *policy* precedent that the Johnson administration set when it supported disaster aid to individuals swiftly gained political support, especially on Capitol Hill. The first move in that direction came very swiftly, when Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield responded to a flood in his home state of Montana by requesting that some of the liberal provisions that the Senate was then debating for Alaska be extended additionally to his suffering constituents. On that occasion, the uniqueness of Alaska's plight was still sufficiently firmly in view to derail Mansfield's request. A year later, though, when the Midwest was ravaged by tornadoes and when Hurricane Betsy assaulted New Orleans, the momentum for individual relief had gained additional momentum, and by the end of the Johnson administration it was firmly embedded in the federal response to disaster.

1.3. Montana Floods, June, 1964

Before then, two other disasters, of nothing like the same magnitude, reached Johnson's desk. Because they were so modest in scale, they need not detain us for long. Equally, that LBJ should have registered them at all is superficially surprising, and warrants brief examination. When heavy rain and a delayed snow-melt caused the Sun River to burst its banks in June of 1964, twenty Montanans lost their lives, and parts of the city of Great Falls were engulfed. Outside the immediate area, however, the flood barely registered, something that one scholar attributes to the comparative political invisibility of its primary victims—nearly all the fatalities were Blackfoot Indians (Parrett 2004). There was scarcely any coverage of the flood in the national press, and a search of the comprehensive *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* discloses not a single story in any of the nation's principal news magazines or popular periodicals.

That notwithstanding, when he heard about the flood Johnson impulsively picked up the phone, pulled Mike Mansfield off the Senate floor, and asked him whether he would like to accompany the president on a tour of the damage, sometime during the next couple of days.¹⁶ Mansfield, clearly caught by surprise, indicated that he would love to, but that he was summoning the Senate into extra sessions to expedite final passage of the civil rights bill, and could not get away until they were through.¹⁷ Stymied, and clearly frustrated by the circumstances, LBJ decided not to go to Montana after all. What was going on here? Direct evidence other than that one recorded phone conversation is lacking, but the circumstantial evidence suggests that the president probably wanted to spend some one-on-one time with Mansfield away from Washington—not to commune about the disaster that had befallen Montana, but rather to talk about Vietnam.

The two men had come to the Senate together, in 1948, and as minority leader Johnson had secured for Mansfield a coveted position on the Foreign Relations Committee. Although LBJ did not consider him a strong majority leader, he continued to like and admire Mansfield—while cerebral, the former professor of East Asian history was also a manly westerner (a sometime copper miner), and someone who had stayed publicly loyal to his friend over Vietnam, despite opposing his policies in private. In 1964, Johnson—who saw other critics such as William Fulbright and Wayne Morse as lost causes--persisted in trying to win Mansfield over to his way of thinking (Ritchie 2003; Bernstein 1996, 343; Bird 1998, 272). Two days before their conversation about the flood, however, Mansfield had sent the

¹⁶ Recorded telephone call to Mansfield, June 11, 1964, phone number WH 6406.06 PNO 13, downloaded from website of the Miller Center of Public Affairs (www.millercenter.org) on Sept. 29, 2016.

¹⁷ Returning to the Senate, the normally mild Mansfield became angry, his face reddening, when a colleague protested at having to miss a military celebration in his home state because of the punishing Senate calendar. "I should be in my home state," Mansfield declared, helping his suffering people. See *Washington Post*, June 12, 1964, A1, *Congressional Record*, June 11, 1964, 13506.

President a very direct four-page memorandum, containing his strongest plea yet for U.S. disengagement.¹⁸

It came just as Johnson was trying to decide how to respond to the shooting down of two American planes in Laos—a new extension of the war. During this period, according to his wife, LBJ “could scarcely concentrate on anything” other than Vietnam; its “problems were nailing him to his desk,” consigning the Great Society’s architect to a pattern of “constant meetings” with his national security team (Johnson 1970, 162-163; entry for June 10, 1964). That impression is substantiated by his daily diaries for the second week in June—indeed, at the very point when he exited the Oval Office to call Mansfield, Johnson was twenty minutes into the latest crisis meeting of his National Security Council.¹⁹ And it is further substantiated by the itinerary of Johnson’s abortive western tour with Mansfield—he had planned to follow the flood visit by taking the majority leader to a security briefing at Strategic Air Command, in Omaha, Nebraska.²⁰

So while Johnson’s seeming interest in a local flood in Montana at first glance suggests the growing role of presidential leadership in disaster-response, in truth it shows almost the opposite: for Johnson, a minor disaster such as this (or the Ohio River flood three months earlier) merely provided a convenient pretext for advancing his larger public policy

¹⁸ Johnson appeared nettled by this memo in contemporary phone conversations with his defense secretary Robert McNamara, and with his friend and long-time mentor, Senator Richard Russell. See Beschloss 1997, 398 (McNamara) and 403 (Russell). LBJ admitted to Russell that, although he found Mansfield’s argument unrealistic, he (like Russell) nevertheless shared some of the Montanan’s fears about the likely course of the conflict.

¹⁹ Daily diary for June 11, 1964, downloaded from www.lbjlib.org on Sept. 29, 2016.

²⁰ Conversation with Mansfield, June 11, 1964.

agenda. As soon as it appeared that the tour with Mansfield would be too hard to organize, LBJ seems to have lost almost all interest in the flood.²¹

1.4: Hurricane Dora, September 1964

In his quest for an historic electoral landslide in November 1964, Johnson paid particular attention to the South, knowing that his support for African American civil rights was creating a strong racial backlash and driving many Dixie Democrats into Barry Goldwater's arms, but determined to do all that he could to eke out wins in states such as Georgia (where he had been warmly received on a recent visit) and Florida (ultimately he would win Florida by two points but lose Georgia by eight) (Woods 2015, 113, 120-125; White 1964, 480). That is why he sent Lady Bird on a 1,600 mile train trip on the "Lady Bird Special" through eight southern states during the final weeks of the campaign. And it also helps explain his response to Hurricane Dora, which swept through the two states just mentioned in mid-September, seven weeks before the election.

Hearing what had happened from his close ally Governor Carl Sanders of Georgia, LBJ made the impetuous decision to gather the press, corral his allies in the Florida and Georgia congressional delegations, and head on down to Jacksonville in Air Force One, abruptly abandoning a lunch for 30 Latin American ambassadors that he had been hosting at the White House.²² Eager to join him, Senator Smathers of Florida had however just started

²¹ He did, however, send his emergency director, Ed McDermott, and Mansfield out to Montana on a presidential jet a few days later. See *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, June 15, 1964, p.2.

²² See taped conversation with Sanders, Sept. 10, 1964, WH6409.09 PNO 3, downloaded from www.millercenter.org, on Sept. 30, 2016; see also his conversation with Gov. Farris Bryant (D-Fla.), another

delivering what was billed as a ten-page address on a related theme—Latin American relations. Speeding up, and skipping from the first page directly to his conclusion, he hotfooted it out of the Senate, and got to Andrews Air Force Base just in time.²³

No one had died in either state, and the affected areas of northeast Florida and southeast Georgia bounced back very quickly (Ward 2004, 6-10). As with his Cincinnati airport touch-down during the Ohio valley flood visit, but to a much more marked degree, his brief visit was dominated by exuberant flesh-pressing. Picking his way through rubble, Johnson exclaimed to his guide, “Spessard, why I believe it’s worse than what you told me” (Spessard Holland was Smathers’ senior colleague). But he did not seem upset by the damage: rather, he strode up to a little girl who was wandering along the road, established that she was Ann Joca, daughter of a local councilman, chatted to her about his two daughters, and gave her a fountain pen with his name on it.²⁴ When he moved on to the town of Brunswick, Georgia, just across the state line, he was greeted both by Goldwater signs and, more agreeably, by one that read “Goodbye Dora, Hello Lyndon!”²⁵

1.5: Midwestern Tornadoes, April 1965

Six months later, the third-deadliest series of tornadoes in American history swept through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois in a three-hour rampage, killing 255 and laying waste to a

close ally, an hour or so later (WH6409.09 PNO 12). He also spoke with Sen Herman Talmadge (D-Ga), and with both Florida senators. See Johnson’s daily diary for Sept. 10 and 11, 1964.

²³ For a light-hearted account, see “Sudden Survey Reduces Wind Volume in Senate,” *St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 12, 1964, p.12.

²⁴ She recounted the experience for television station WJAX on Sept. 14, 2014. See <http://www.news4jax.com/news/mary-ann-joca>, downloaded on Oct. 4, 2016.

²⁵ *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 1964, 9.

series of towns, especially in northern Indiana.²⁶ Simultaneously, flooding was causing extensive damage in the upper Midwest, particularly Minnesota. By now, the Great Society was also at flood-tide: LBJ had just signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare had passed the House, a strong Voting Rights bill had cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee, important water pollution and Appalachia bills had reached the statute books. David Broder of the *Washington Post* later compared what he had witnessed during these first hundred days of Johnson's full term to "a half-mad, half-drunk Texas square dance, with Johnson, the fiddler and caller, steadily increasing the tempo, speeding up the beat—his music and his call punctuated, but never interrupted, by the offstage explosion of crises from Vietnam to the Dominican Republic" (Broder 1971, 49).²⁷

On the day of this latest disaster, Johnson was winding up a weekend visit to his ranch, the highlight of which had been the signing of the education bill at his former school-house, in the company of a number of his teachers and classmates. Back in Washington, he threw out the first pitch of the baseball season for the hapless Senators, dedicated the modest FDR commemorative stone that stands in front of the National Archives (on the twentieth anniversary of his hero's death), received a phone call from the governor of tornado-hit Ohio, James Rhodes, and then held a reception for congressional supporters of the education bill, a number of whom had been miffed by his decision to sign it out in Texas (Davies 2007, 304).

Keeping legislators happy was probably even more important to Johnson in the spring of 1965 than was ordinarily the case, given the degree to which he had dominated

²⁶ For death-toll, see Memo, Buford Ellington to LBJ, April 13, 1965, in WHCF Executive DI 5, Box 6, Johnson Library, Austin, Tex.

²⁷ For a sprightly summary of the unique pace that LBJ demanded of the 89th Congress, see Broder 1971, 49-58.

their agenda during the past three months, and the tremendous volume of business that he was expecting them to transact during the remainder of an already punishing session. That may help to explain why he invited the entire congressional delegations of Ohio, Indiana and Minnesota to accompany him on Air Force One, when he headed out for a 2,100 mile, ten-hour tour of the damage early the following morning. Four of the six Senators from those states went along, together with twenty members of the House, doubtless keen in some cases not just to see the damage but perhaps to bask in the reflected glory of the president's company, at a time when 65 percent of Americans approved of the job that he was doing.²⁸

Whatever the political thinking behind this disaster tour, it is evident from press coverage that seeing the colossal tornado damage, and talking to its victims, had a considerable impact on Johnson.²⁹ Normally so loquacious and exuberant when meeting crowds (as during his touchdown at Cincinnati airport during his flood-tour a year earlier, or after Hurricane Dora), he was left stunned and almost monosyllabic. When an Indiana television newsman asked him for his "impressions" of the damage, "he simply shrugged his shoulders and shook his head."³⁰ The *Washington Post's* reporter found him "grim and solemn" throughout the day, while Frank Cormier described him as being "misty-eyed at times."³¹ In his few public statements, he stated far more forcefully than in response to any

²⁸ See Johnson's daily diary for April 14, 1965, *New York Times*, April 15, 1964, 1; Harris poll, April 1965, accessed from ipoll database. All but five of the 22 legislators named in the daily diary were Democrats, in part reflecting the important gains that the party had made in the Midwest on LBJ's coat-tails in 1964.

²⁹ It is conceivable that the demeanor described in this paragraph also owed something to exhaustion and distraction. In her diary for April 18, Lady Bird noted that they had "talked about the short nights Lyndon has been having....He asked to be waked up whenever there was an operation going out [in Vietnam]. He won't leave it alone. He said, 'I want to be called every time somebody dies'. He can't separate himself from it." Quoted by Beschloss 2001, 280. At the conclusion of the tornado trip, Johnson commented to an aide that "he certainly didn't feel very peppy, and he hoped he could do better for the rest of the evening." Recorded in daily diary, April 14, 1965.

³⁰ *Ocala [Fla.] Star-Banner*, April 14, 1965, 1, *New York Times*, April 15, 1964, 25.

³¹ *Washington Post*, April 15, 1964, 1, *Gettysburg [Pa] Times*, April 16, 1965, 8.

earlier disaster what he felt to be the obligations of government in such an emergency. In Toledo, Ohio, he pledged that Washington would “do everything conceivably possible under our laws.” In Dunlap, Indiana, he declared that “at an hour and time like this, the federal government must not be something cold and far away, but a warm friend and a warm neighbour.”³²

Johnson’s tour was warmly received by the communities that he visited. Among the appreciative newspaper editorials that his Indiana ally, Cong. John Brademas, introduced into the *Congressional Record* the following month, was one from a South Bend paper that opened by inquiring “what good a Presidential visit does anybody after a tornado has flattened his home or business, or has killed and maimed his family.” It went on, however, to suggest two benefits. First, and most obviously, “a demonstration of personal Presidential concern...cannot help but prod the Federal agencies to cut through redtape and bypass normal channels.” Second, it could help to personalize “the sprawling bureaucracy that is the Federal Government in the 1960s....The Presidential visit briefly transforms the institution into a symbol, a person to be seen and spoken to,” providing evidence to victims “that somebody cares,” and thereby raising their “distressed spirits.”³³

Traditionally, in fact, American Presidents had *not* performed this pastoral function, and certainly not in response to a natural disaster whose effects, however traumatic, were confined to a single region. The nearest equivalent that one could find might be Franklin Roosevelt’s fireside chats, but those had been delivered in response to the national and epochal disaster of the Great Depression. Yet the Indiana editorialist just quoted did not present this kind of empathetic leadership as being at all surprising. Perhaps that owes

³² Lewiston [Maine] *Daily Sun*, April 15, 1965, 1.

³³ South Bend [Ind] *Tribune*, April 15, 1965, reproduced in *Congressional Record*, May 11, 1965, 10211.

something to the way that television had helped to personalize presidential politics during the past decade, despite the vastness and bureaucratic character of modern government. That trend had been compounded, moreover, by the glamorous, youthful White House presence of John F. Kennedy and his family during the early 1960s, and by the growing interest of Camelot communications staff in 'news management' (Boorstin 1964; Greenberg 2016, 317-394). And it may also be relevant that his successor should have possessed such a proprietorial attitude to his office. (Recollecting this tendency, Mike Mansfield observed that "everything was MY in his vocabulary: he talked about...MY Army, MY Air Force, MY Navy" [Ritchie 2003, 193]). LBJ's visit to see tornado-damage represents the first, but not the last, instance of his employing this conception of the presidency in relation to natural disaster. It is the first appearance too of the by-now-familiar presidential role of Consoler-in-Chief.

John Brademas's objective in inserting these editorials into the record was more practical: by stressing Johnson's personal concern for tornado-victims, he hoped to secure more generous federal relief for his constituents. In particular, he and Indiana colleagues used Johnson's visit and the precedent set by Alaskan earthquake relief to argue that the federal government must now start providing disaster aid to individuals, rather than leaving that to the Red Cross (see Morris 2014, 409-412, focusing on the role of Brademas's Senate colleague, Birch Bayh). In the short-term, that idea ran into the dirt: within the budget bureau and the federal Office of Emergency Planning, officials were worried that disaster-hit communities were starting to look to Washington to an unhealthy degree, and they refused to support Brademas.³⁴ When Hurricane Betsy crashed into the Gulf Coast in September,

³⁴ See Philip Hughes to Lee White, June 16, 1965 and Elmer Staats to Lee White, June 30, 1965, both in WHCF, Executive LE/DI, Box 35, LBJ Library; see also Brademas to Philip Hughes, June 11, 1965, in WHCF, Executive

however, their qualms counted for nothing, as Lyndon Johnson placed his full weight behind an unprecedentedly generous aid package. More generally too the White House response to Betsy might be viewed as the point at which Washington started to be the lead actor when disaster struck, rather than simply a supporting actor.

Part II: Betsy and the Birth of Modern Disaster Politics

The second hurricane of the 1965 season described an erratic course through the Caribbean, and then, having appeared to be heading up the Atlantic coast, abruptly cut south and headed across southern Florida, before accelerating across the Gulf of Mexico--first toward Texas, then Mississippi, finally making its second American landfall in southeast Louisiana. Despite that chaotic path, local officials managed to organize the evacuation of much of rural southeast Louisiana—residents of Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes streamed into New Orleans to take refuge in Red Cross and municipal shelters. As for evacuation *within* the Crescent City, that was more problematic: civil defense officials assumed that flooding would come from Lake Pontchartrain, directly to the north of the city, as had happened in 1947 and 1915, and recommended the emptying only of low-lying residential areas near the lake. In the event, though, Betsy's powerful forward thrust carried Gulf waters across the marshes further east instead, and the newly built Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MR GO) funnelled them in to the heart of the city via the Industrial Canal, causing levee breaks on both sides of the canal that inundated areas the city had expected

LE/DI5, Box 35, LBJ Library ("The visit of President Johnson to my own area only makes more dramatic the present slow response of the Executive Branch of the government in commenting on these bills"). For hostility within OEP to growing expectations of federal aid, see below.

to stay dry—Gentilly and Bywater to the west of the canal, the Lower Ninth Ward to its east.³⁵

Having not been advised to evacuate, thousands of residents of the Lower Ninth Ward and adjacent parts of St. Bernard Parish had to scramble to their attics and spend the night on their roofs, and about eighty of them died. Some were rescued the next day by a Dunkirk-like voluntary operation of local boat-owners, while others swam and waded to the nearest dry land, which for many was the St. Claude Avenue bridge over the industrial canal. Others stayed on their roofs for days. While other parts of the city returned to normal quickly (their main problems had been loss of power and wind-damage), refugees from the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard could not go home for two weeks: the water lay up to ten feet deep, the main pump in the area was broken, and it seemed to take a few days for the city to register quite how desperate conditions were in the marginalized, largely African American neighborhood east of the canal.³⁶ Eventually returning home, homeowners there (the Lower Ninth Ward had high levels of home-ownership), and also in largely white St. Bernard Parish, found their neighborhoods largely uninhabitable: the city had removed dead livestock and dogs, organized a public health offensive, and made a start on piling up debris, but many homes and business were utterly ruined.³⁷

³⁵ This summary is based on Campanella 2008, 321-23; Colten 2009, 34-37 (with a helpful map at 35); and Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, *Report on Hurricane Betsy, September 9-10, 1965*, typescript report dated Oct. 8, 1965, copy in papers of Edward Hébert, Box 525, Tulane University Library, New Orleans. For the astonishment of civil defense officials that Jackson Barracks in the Lower Ninth Ward had been inundated, see "A Hurricane Called Betsy," a 1966 Department of Defense documentary, downloaded on October 3, 2016 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWkjo7k2izg>³⁶ I base this paragraph largely on contemporary coverage in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and the *Louisiana Weekly*.

³⁶ I base this paragraph largely on contemporary coverage in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and the *Louisiana Weekly*.

³⁷ For vivid insights into the desperate circumstances that these flood victims faced, see the five oral histories that historian Nimila Mwendo Betsy conducted with Betsy survivors in 2003, stored in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, university library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. These may be

Lyndon Johnson and Hurricane Betsy

President Johnson learned about the hurricane when he received a phone call from his powerful ally, Russell Long (D-La), the Senate majority whip. Speaking in the immediate aftermath of the storm, Long (who was in Washington) had been able glean only fragmentary information about what had happened, some of it inaccurate. Still, the vivid word-portrait that he drew for LBJ described a city in crisis, one whose inhabitants desperately needed to hear from their president. Urging Johnson to pay an immediate visit to New Orleans, Long predicted that doing so would impress Louisianans who had mostly voted against him the previous year because of his strong stand on civil rights. "If you go there right now, Mr. President," Long declared, "they couldn't beat you if *Eisenhower* ran."³⁸

Despite that attractive prospect, Johnson was initially doubtful. For one thing, he was unwell: he had awoken two days previously in severe pain, and he and his wife were worried that he was about to have a second heart attack.³⁹ For another (and this was the point that he emphasized to Long), he was extremely busy during the second week of September: important elements of his domestic agenda remained unpassed, Congress was desperate to adjourn, and he was working even harder than usual to force his remaining Great Society measures through.⁴⁰ Additionally, his friend Buford Ellington, who headed the Office of Emergency Planning, was alarmed by growing pressure on the Hill and among governors for generous disaster relief, determined to resist that pressure, and opposed a

downloaded from <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/oralhistory/collections/hurricanebetsy>. For a recent article that makes extensive use of this resource, see Horowitz 2014.

³⁸ For a transcript of this Sept. 10, 2016 conversation, see Kent Germany, "LBJ and the Response to Hurricane Betsy," prepared for the Miller Center for Public Affairs, and downloaded on Oct. 3, 2016 from <http://millercenter.org/presidentialclassroom/exhibits/lbj-and-the-response-to-hurricane-betsy>.

³⁹ When Lady Bird had left him that morning, he had been in bed, wired up to an EKG monitor. See *Johnson 1970*, entry for Sept. 7, 1965, 316-18. LBJ was actually suffering from gallstones, and underwent surgery a month or so later.

⁴⁰ See Broder 1971, esp. 53-55, and *U.S. News and World Report*, Aug. 30, 1965, 8.

presidential visit to New Orleans—he told LBJ that he knew of no fatalities there, hinting that Long might have exaggerated the scale of the disaster.⁴¹

For Johnson, however, rewarding Long for his political loyalty overrode all other considerations. “Here’s my problem,” he told Ellington. As Majority Whip, Long had “had to do a lot of things that he didn’t want to do at all,” out of loyalty to LBJ, “and he’s an emotional [expletive deleted].” The political cost back home had been high, not just for Long but for other Louisiana allies such as Cong. Hale Boggs (House Majority Whip) and Senator James Ellender (number two Democrat on the Appropriations Committee). They “feel like nobody cares about them,” Johnson remarked, and “I want them to know they’re loved.”⁴²

Calling Long back, Johnson instructed him: “Be at the White House in 15 minutes. If you are not at the White House in fifteen minutes, I will be on my way to Louisiana by myself.”⁴³ Then he departed for Louisiana, accompanied by the usual retinue of disaster officials together with Long, Boggs, Ellender, and Cong. Ed Willis (also a White House ally). The initial intention was to land at Moisant Field, make a speech, and then fly back to Washington. In the event, though, New Orleans mayor Victor Schiro (yet another strong Johnson loyalist to whom the president felt indebted) persuaded him to join him on a tour, the press following behind in a bus (Haas 1990, 71-72). Arriving at the St. Claude Avenue bridge, Johnson left his car, looked out over the Lower Ninth Ward, witnessed African American flood survivors disembarking from boats, saw “marooned families clinging to the

⁴¹ See taped phone conversation between LBJ and Ellington, Sept. 10, 1965, WH650903, PNO 4, downloaded from www.millercenter.org. For Ellington’s more general concern about disaster spending, see memo, Charles Brewster to Ellington, Aug. 12, 1965, and memo, Ellington to Lee White, Aug. 4, 1965, both in WHCF Exec IS 3, Box 5, LBJL.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Long recounts the conversation in *Congressional Record*, Sept. 15, 1965, 23865.

roofs of their homes,” and had an extended conversation with an elderly black man about the terrible experience that he had just endured.⁴⁴ Returning to the airport, Johnson then impulsively disembarked again, plunging into an elementary school in the Upper Ninth Ward that was serving as a makeshift refugee center.

It is this particular moment in the tour that has most impressed recent commentators seeking to contrast Johnson’s approach to Betsy with Bush’s response to Katrina. There was no power in the building and night had fallen, leaving the school dark and oppressively hot. What is more, because it was an *ad hoc* center, there was no food, no bedding, no provision for sanitation, and no drinking water. Johnson’s daily diary (kept by an aide) describes a “mass of human suffering,” continuing that “calls of ‘water—water—water’ ...resounded over and over again in terribly emotional wails from voices of all ages.” With an aide holding a flashlight to his face, Johnson declared “I am your President and I’m here to help.” “That’s not the president,” one refugee declared: “He wouldn’t come down here.”⁴⁵ Other flood survivors clamored around him, describing their desperate circumstances and seeking help in locating loved ones.⁴⁶ Exiting the school, and addressing the most common demand, Johnson ordered Buford Ellington to locate drinking water and Mayor Schiro to contact local bottling plants.

Reporters remarked variously that Johnson was “shocked,” “distressed,” and “shaken” by what he had seen.⁴⁷ That was his wife’s impression too. Returning to the

⁴⁴ For a detailed summary, see Johnson’s daily diary for Sept. 10, 1965. See also *Boston Globe*, Sept. 11, 1965. For a transcript of his conversation with Marshall, see http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/AV.hom/Hurricane/audio_transcript.shtm, downloaded on Oct. 3, 2016. For “marooned families,” see Office of Emergency Planning, *Hurricane Betsy: Federal Action in Disaster* (Washington, DC: OEP, 1966), 5.

⁴⁵ Daily diary, Sept. 10, 1965; “Solace for a Stricken City,” *Time Magazine*, Sept. 17, 1965, 42; Haas 1990, 73.

⁴⁶ *Washington Post*, Sept. 13, 1965, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, *Manchester Guardian* Sept. 13, 1965, 1.

White House after a brief trip out West, she was shocked to find that her “supposedly sick husband” had gone to New Orleans and was not yet back:

He came along about one A.M., looking exhausted but talking of nothing but the hurricane damage. He began checking the Departments (even at that hour of the night) about whether food was being flown in and if enough medicine and cots were available. He told me of the man who rushed up to him and cried, “I’ve lost my baby!” Lyndon’s face contorted just as the man’s had, as though he were about to cry. He said it was horrible (Johnson 1970, 320, Sept. 11, 1965).

The following morning, though, LBJ seemed less upset than energized. In part, to be sure, this was because his doctor was reporting that he had lost 13 lbs in weight. Mainly, though, he was upbeat because (according to his daily diary) “everything went so well on [the] Louisiana hurricane survey trip,” which he felt to have been “most necessary” and “worthwhile.”⁴⁸ Whereas after previous disaster trips he had been happy to leave the details of his administration’s response to his administrators, in this case he remained closely involved.⁴⁹ Doubtless this owed much to the shocking suffering that he had witnessed in New Orleans, but that was probably not the decisive influence: after all, he had also been shocked by his visit to the tornado zone three months previously, without taking personal charge of the federal relief operation. More important was the exceptional power of the Louisiana congressional delegation in 1965, and LBJ’s desire to keep it happy.

So what did Johnson do? According to Long, he personally directed the Air Force to fly telephone engineers down to New Orleans to restore communications.⁵⁰ He stayed in

⁴⁸ Daily diary, Sept. 11, 1965.

⁴⁹ See OEP, *Hurricane Betsy*, 5.

⁵⁰ Radio interview in Lafourche Parish, with Long, Governor John McKeithen and local officials, Sept. 11, 1965. See Audio Tape # 3, Box 749, papers of Russell Long, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

close contact with Louisiana elected officials.⁵¹ And he even phoned OEP's *regional* head in the Gulf to find out what federal workers were doing on the ground, and to demand daily progress reports.⁵² But perhaps the most dramatic illustration of his concern came when Long informed Johnson of an upcoming meeting in Baton Rouge at which Governor John McKeithen was going to brief local officials on the federal assistance that was available for flood victims. Would LBJ like to participate in the meeting by phone?⁵³ LBJ had a different suggestion: he and Long called the second-in-command at the Office of Emergency Planning in Washington to discuss the federal relief effort, and then shared their recorded conversation with McKeithen in Baton Rouge.⁵⁴

As with many of Johnson's phone calls, his interlocutor hardly got in a word edgewise: the President's sole purpose was evidently to impress Long and McKeithen with his personal commitment to generous federal aid. He started by listing the *twenty* federal agencies that he was looking to lead the effort. Then he provided a summary of his overall philosophy of disaster aid:

In times of distress, it's necessary that all the members of the family get together and lay aside any individual problems they have or any personal grievances and try to take care of the sick mother, and we've got a sick mother on our hands. And as I said the other night when I was there, we've got to cut out all the red tape. We've

⁵¹ See daily diaries for Sept. 11 through Sept. 15, 1965, including conversations with Schiro, Long, Boggs, and Cong. James Morrison (D-La.).

⁵² See n.a., Notes on a Sept. 11, 1965 meeting in Mayor Schiro's office, at which the OEP regional head, George Hastings, was present: Hastings "said that the President had called to inquire as to what they had done and planned to do, how people in shelters were getting along with regard to water and food, particularly for children. The President asked that they get started tonight on Federal housing, and Mr. W.W. Collins, Head of the F.H.A. in Fort Worth, has his people coming to New Orleans tonight to check on this. He added that the President said to be sure to call him for anything we needed." Series S-65, Box 12, Papers of Victor Schiro, New Orleans Public Library.

⁵³ See Memo, Mike Manatos to Marvin Watson, Sept. 14, 1965, WHCF Gen TR 70, Box 22, LBJL. I am grateful to Claudia Anderson of the Johnson library for having furnished me with a copy of this memo.

⁵⁴ A cassette tape containing Johnson's recorded statement, Sept. 14, 1965, can be found in Long's papers, Box 749.

got to work around the clock. We've got to ignore hours. We've got to bear in mind that we exist for only one purpose and that's to the greatest good for the greatest number. And the people who've lost their homes, people who've lost their furniture, the people who have lost some of their crops and even their families are not going to be very interested in any individual differences between federal or state or local agencies.

So I hope that all the government people can put their shoulder to the wheel without regard to hours, without regard to red tape. Bring to these people the kind of assistance they need in this emergency which is worthy of a great government and a great country. [And] if you have any problems, well, let me know about them.⁵⁵

Johnson remained personally engaged the following month, either side of his gall bladder surgery, offering strong support to Long, Boggs and their colleagues when they sought to help out the thousands of home owners in Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes who had lost their homes, remained mortgaged up to the hilt, and now needed to continue payments on their existing loan even as they took out additional borrowing to fund rebuilding. It was a distressing but also a familiar post-disaster picture, one where the federal government had hitherto not been willing to provide direct relief, save in the unique case of Alaska. With overworked legislators now increasingly desperate to escape Washington, the Louisiana delegation's proposal that the Small Business Administration forgive up to \$1,800 of every post-Betsy 'loan' would have had little prospect of success had it not been for Johnson's personal support, the more so given that it was strongly opposed by the president's budget bureau and by Buford Ellington--who warned that the Betsy Bill could "destroy the entire program" by encouraging ever-more extravagant claims for

⁵⁵ For a full transcript of LBJ and Long's conversation with Robert Phillips, see Germany, "LBJ and the Response to Hurricane Betsy."

federal relief.⁵⁶ With LBJ's backing, though, it won passage, along with funding for the Army Corps of Engineers' ambitious blueprint for protecting New Orleans from future inundation. They were among the last accomplishments of the 89th Congress's historic first session.

Conclusion

The vertiginous increase in federal disaster spending that occurred during the next decade or so seems to bear out Buford Ellington's warning. During the 'long' Great Society era (extended to take account of the strongly reformist legacy of Nixon's first term), Washington became the lead actor in disaster response, rather than – as before – a supporting actor. In particular, Johnson's backing for the Betsy bill helped to embed the idea that the federal government had obligations not just to restore infrastructure, as had previously been the case, but to alleviate the suffering of individuals—previously the job of subnational governments and the American Red Cross.⁵⁷ In that sense, Johnson's presidency marks the beginning of modern disaster politics: the sharp criticism that FEMA after Hurricane Andrew in 1992 or Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is to be explained not simply in terms of its undoubted missteps but in relation to the new patterns of federal disaster relief that developed during the Great Society era.

Also notable is the degree of LBJ's personal involvement in disaster politics.

Previously, it had been uncommon for presidents to visit the site of a disaster--dealing with

⁵⁶ See memos, Ellington to Johnson, Oct. 11, 1965, and Sept. 29, 1965, in WHCF Exec DI 6, Box 1, LBJL; also Ellington's note to Marvin Watson, Oct. 8, 1965, complaining that "this thing" (disaster relief in general) "is getting out of hand," and must be "curtail[ed] as much as possible," in WHCF Gen DI, Box 1, LBJL. For LBJ's support for the Betsy bill, see AP bulletin, Oct. 11, 1965, in WHCF Exec LE/DI6, Box 35, and Haas 1990, 82, 84. For Long's irritation at foot-dragging within the federal bureaucracy, see *Congressional Record*, Oct. 20, 1965, 27501.

⁵⁷ See Morris 2014, for how this precedent was built upon during the Nixon Administration

disaster at the federal level had been largely a matter for inconspicuous bureaucrats within agencies such as the Small Business Administration and the Bureau of Public Roads. During Johnson's tenure, that changed: he visited four disaster scenes during the first two years of his presidency. And while other presidents had been content with an aerial tour, Johnson wanted to meet disaster victims and hear their stories. That sounds like modern disaster politics—no longer simply a bureaucratic operation, but rather one that involves White House leadership and the president as consoler-in-chief. In that sense, Johnson's conduct of disaster superficially appears to explain not just the battering that FEMA received after Katrina but the severe personal criticism that George W. Bush incurred.

What explains Lyndon Johnson's new approach? It was doubtless greatly facilitated by a variety of comparatively new features of the larger political environment, starting with faster transportation. Whereas Harry Truman's aeroplane was a – by contemporary standards – slow and small propeller plane, Air Force One under LBJ was a large, fast jet—a modified Boeing 707. That meant that it was now possible to fly down to a disaster scene quickly and return the same day, and to take along a retinue of politicians and reporters (Walsh 2003). Also important was the advent of the communications satellite, and the way that it allowed live television images from distant points to be beamed into American living rooms. It was this new technology that led television networks to extend news bulletins from fifteen to thirty minutes in 1963, and to introduce live footage from reporters in the field. That in turn would, over time, create new political pressure to act when a dramatic natural disaster struck. And, together with the telegenic and news-managing precedent set by John F. Kennedy, it also contributed to the changing nature of the presidency, with growing media interest in the President's every action encouraging his handlers to confect visually attractive images of leadership.

Still, the relationship between these large themes and the new form of presidential disaster politics that started to materialize during the Johnson presidency is not straightforward. After all, LBJ was not constrained by exogenous circumstance to respond in the way that he did. Rather, he had plenty of latitude—he *chose* to visit Ohio, Florida, Indiana, and Louisiana following their disasters, chose *not* to visit Alaska or Montana, and in every case appears to have been responding to his personal political calculus rather than to outside pressure. In that context, Lyndon Johnson’s approach to disaster politics appears to have arisen less from external circumstance than from his unique political personality—the exuberant flesh-pressing, the impulsiveness, the desire of ‘Big Daddy from the Pedernales’ to win the gratitude of his flock, the astonishing talent for political horse-trading (Conkin 1986).

It could be, of course, that Johnson’s approach, however personal or idiosyncratic, created expectations that his successors had no alternative but to try to follow. The problem with advancing this argument is that even his most dramatic disaster leadership, after Hurricane Betsy, was not a big news story at the time, outside of Louisiana, and neither did it loom large in subsequent accounts of the Johnson presidency, either by memoirists or by historians. Johnson did not mention it in his biography, and neither did any of the principal aides who were serving him in 1965.⁵⁸ And neither do any of the standard Johnson biographies or Great Society histories make any reference to Betsy.

The explanation for this puzzle lies in the single aspect of Johnson’s conduct of disaster politics that was arguably most old-fashioned, namely his ‘retail’ rather than ‘wholesale’ approach. Whereas disaster politics under Nixon and his successors was often

⁵⁸ This is based on a consultation of memoirs by Harry McPherson, Jack Valenti, Liz Carpenter, Larry O’Brien, Marvin Watson and George Reedy. The only memoir to mention Betsy is Lady Bird Johnson’s diary, cited above.

motivated in substantial part by public relations considerations—by a desire to *project* compassion and decisiveness to the American people in time of crisis—Johnson’s responses to the disasters that punctuated his early presidency were mostly guided by more substantive objectives. In responding to the Ohio valley floods, he sought to woo an important clutch of Midwestern governors. In leading the Alaska earthquake response from behind the scenes, he hoped to keep his Civil Rights bill afloat. And in his response to tornado and hurricane in 1965, he cultivated legislators whose support and goodwill he needed if he were to “outdo Roosevelt” and construct a truly historic legislative record.⁵⁹

This generalization about ‘retail’ rather than ‘wholesale’ politics even holds true for the single most theatrical moment in Johnson’s response to Betsy, namely his dramatic appearance at the George Washington Elementary School in New Orleans. Far from playing to the gallery here, he had no audience beyond the traumatized flood-survivors who surrounded him: although he had been accompanied to New Orleans by a gaggle of journalists, they do not appear to have been with him when he strode into the school.⁶⁰ And his retail approach to politics was again on display a year later, when a graduate student at the University of Texas in Austin climbed the tower in the center of its campus and shot dead thirteen passers-by. This was, according to the Associated Press, the second biggest news story of 1966, after the Vietnam War, but the president’s public response was limited to a statement calling for stronger federal gun-control.⁶¹ When a memorial service

⁵⁹ For LBJ’s particular preoccupation with transcending FDR at the time of Hurricane Betsy, see historian William Leuchtenburg’s (1990) account of the interview that he conducted with Johnson at this time.

⁶⁰ For the only report containing a detailed description of this scene, see *Washington Star*, Sept. 11, 1965, A3.

⁶¹ See <http://www.texasmonthly.com/category/topics/ut-tower-shooting>, downloaded on Oct. 4, 2016; *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 1966, 21.

was held in Austin later in the year, Johnson did not attend, even though he and Lady Bird were at the nearby LBJ Ranch, and despite the fact that they knew one of the victims.⁶²

Before the Great Society, the federal government's role in responding to disaster was already well-established, but the main responsibility continued to lie with subnational governments and the Red Cross. Under LBJ, that changed: for the first time, Washington became the lead player, and this may be regarded as one of the very many ways in which the Great Society transformed American government. Johnson also injected the White House into federal disaster politics to a far greater degree than had any of his predecessor, in a way that anticipated the modern presidential role of consoler-in-chief. Here, though, it is harder to say that LBJ made a decisive difference, given the absence of the kind of choreography and ballyhoo that have accompanied subsequent presidential disaster politics. The idea that it was the president's job to channel the grief of a disaster-hit community, the role of consoler-in-chief, had yet fully to take shape.

⁶² Johnson did, however, telephone the mother and grandfather of this shooting victim, Paul Bolton Jr., four hours after the shooting. See conversation with Paul Bolton and Beverly Sonntag, Aug. 1, 1966, WH6608.01 PNO 9, downloaded on Oct. 4, 1966 from www.millercenter.org.

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