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.claierubin.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 Kukuyama, 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)
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
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
Speaker Information

- Claire B. Rubin (cbrubin@gmail.com)

- Speaker’s websites:
  - www.clairerubin.com
  - www.disasterbookstore.com
  - www.disaster-timeline.com
  - http://recoverydiva.com