



# Disasters and the American State: How Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Public Prepare for the Unexpected

By Professor Patrick S. Roberts

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Disasters and the American State offers a thesis about the trajectory of federal government involvement in preparing for disaster shaped by contingent events. Politicians and bureaucrats claim credit for the government's successes in preparing for and responding to disaster, and they are also blamed for failures outside of government's control. New interventions have created precedents and established organizations and administrative cultures that accumulated over time and produced a general trend in which citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats expect the government to provide more security from more kinds of disasters. The trend reached its peak when the Federal Emergency Management Agency adopted the idea of preparing for "all hazards" as its mantra. Despite the rhetoric, however, the federal government's increasingly bold claims and heightened public expectations are disproportionate to the ability of the federal government to prevent or reduce the damage caused by disaster.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"All in all, Patrick Roberts' *Disaster and the American State* is excellent - imminently readable, well sourced, and compelling; it is must-reading for individuals interested in disaster politics and policy, state capacity, or American political development."

- Logan Strother, *Disasters, Property, and Politics*

"Roberts' balanced handling of the much misunderstood response to Katrina is magisterial ... This is not only a powerfully argued, relentlessly fair account of the troubles that plague the federal management of disaster, but also an edifying comment on the limits any modern democracy faces in acting swiftly and effectively."

--Kirkus Reviews

"Professor Patrick S. Roberts has written an informative and sometimes provocative text raising issues about the complexity of the American disaster system and the challenges for creating a disaster-resilient nation. It is clear that this is not just an academic treatise. It provides a contextual format for young professionals entering the emergency management field as to the difficulties they will face. For the experienced emergency manager it is a 'milepost marker' to help understand how we arrived at this point in our history and their own role in shaping the future of the American disaster experience."

Eric E. Holdeman, columnist, Emergency Management Magazine, and blogger, Disaster-Zone

"In this lively book, Roberts lays out the fascinating history of government's growing role in dealing with disasters. His analysis of the change from a government in transition - from responding to events to trying to manage them - is a tremendously important and pathbreaking contribution to a question that increasingly, and inevitably, demands the best thinking we can bring. Roberts has done just that."

Donald F. Kettl, Dean, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland

"How did the United States end up with the unwieldy homeland security apparatus it finds itself with today? Professor Roberts' masterly account of the development of disaster politics provides the definitive answer. Historically detailed, theoretically rich, and eminently readable, *Disasters and the American State* traces the social construction of the idea of disaster and the state's role in response. It is an important contribution for anyone interested not just in disaster, but more broadly in the historical development of the American state."

Donald Moynihan, Professor of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin, Madison

"[Roberts] has immersed himself with admirable thoroughness in the tangled story of how the federal government came to be the lead actor when disaster strikes. Above all, he develops a thoroughly persuasive historical and institutional explanation for how FEMA came to be a byword for bureaucratic incompetence - first, at the turn of the 1990s, then, more spectacularly, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina."

Gareth Davies, The Forum

"Roberts' balanced handling of the much misunderstood response to Katrina is magisterial ... This is not only a powerfully argued, relentlessly fair account of the troubles that plague the federal management of disaster, but also an edifying comment on the limits any modern democracy faces in acting swiftly and effectively."

## Kirkus Reviews

"... a thoroughly persuasive account of the long and uneven development of what he calls the American "disaster state". Roberts' fundamental goal is to help us understand contemporary disaster politics, including how past politics and institutions have given rise to these politics. He draws on insights from the literature on American political development to provide us with this account, which emphasizes the role of historical patterns as well as idiosyncrasies in creating these politics, and their roles in shaping the American state. The book is very well written, provocative, and well researched. Anyone interested in American political development should find it compelling, and of course, disaster scholars may be especially interested." Logan Strother, Disaster, Property and Politics blog ([disasterspropertypolitics.com](http://disasterspropertypolitics.com))

## From the Back Cover

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## About the Author

Patrick S. Roberts is an Associate Professor at the Center for Public Administration and Policy (CPAP) in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He is the Associate Chair and Program Director for CPAP, Northern Virginia. Roberts holds a PhD in government from the University of Virginia, and spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow, one at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, California and another with the Program on Constitutional Government at Harvard University, Massachusetts. He spent 2010-11 as the Ghaemian Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Heidelberg Center for American Studies in Germany. He has also been a reporter for the Associated Press. Roberts' work has been published in a variety of scholarly and popular journals including *Studies in American Political Development*, *the Public Administration Review*, *the Journal of Policy History*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Publius*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Administration and Society*, *the Public Organization Review*, *National Affairs*, *the Policy Review*, *American Interest*, and *USA Today*. His research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the United States Naval Laboratories, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Social Science Research Council.

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