

'Historically inclined' anthropologists trace the evolution of US emergency risk assessment and response

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Local and FEMA Urban Search and Rescue workers and U.S. Coast Guard members search for residents needing assistance after Hurricane Katrina left New Orleans neighborhoods flooded in 2005. Credit: FEMA/Jocelyn Augustino

"Where were you when ...?"

This question frequently ends in disaster—or rather, with the naming of one: "... the pandemic began"; "... Hurricane Katrina struck"; "... the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place."

Disasters loom large in the pantheon of historical events, capturing attention, striking a deep chord of empathy for those affected, and motivating a desire among the public, policymakers and governments to be more prepared for the next one.

The United States possesses a comparatively robust system for anticipating and governing emergencies, but it still holds much room for improvement. Understanding how the [current system](#) came to be serves as a solid first step in making it better.

Andrew Lakoff, professor of sociology and anthropology at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, provides this foundation with a comprehensive look at the U.S. [emergency management](#) system's evolution from the early 20th century to the present. His work is presented in his latest book, "[The Government of Emergency: Vital Systems, Expertise, and the Politics of Security](#)" (Princeton University Press, 2021).

Lakoff and his co-author, Stephen Collier of the University of California, Berkeley, became interested in the [government's](#) system of risk and emergency management—how it came to be and why it addresses problems as it does—in the early 2000s, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina.

"We saw [government officials](#) drawing analogies among a range of very different kinds of occurrences—from terrorism to [natural disasters](#), environmental catastrophes and pandemics, and even to [financial crises](#)

—and we were curious to understand what linked these seemingly disparate events," Lakoff said.

The two "historically inclined anthropologists," as Lakoff describes himself and Collier, share an interest in biopolitics, a field of study focusing on how experts and governments seek to foster the health and well-being of populations.

A patchwork system with surprising root

As it now stands, the country's risk management and emergency preparedness system comprises a patchwork of cooperating groups.

"It's a distributed system with a fairly limited federal role that depends on flexible coordination among government and non-governmental agencies at multiple scales, across multiple jurisdictions," Lakoff explained. For example, after a catastrophic storm, the Federal Emergency Management Agency may coordinate with the [local governments](#) of affected cities and disaster relief nonprofits, such as the American Red Cross, to deliver aid to citizens.

This distribution of authority, responsibility and action avoids the danger of an overly centralized bureaucracy that relies on those at the top to make all key decisions, Lakoff says, but it can also make a timely and well-coordinated response difficult.

The arrangement has advantages: It can quickly address short-term needs, such as providing needed supplies or rapidly evacuating an area.

The system falls short, however, when it comes to larger issues, such as unequal access to relief and preventive programs among different communities.

"We have seen this repeatedly," said Lakoff, "whether in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or in the disparate experience of suffering during the coronavirus pandemic."

To determine how the present-day system of emergency government came to be, says Lakoff, he and Collier took a "genealogical approach" to the work, looking at current agencies and protocols and tracing back through their evolution.

"We began in the present, looking at areas such as homeland security and pandemic preparedness, and asked about where the tools used by experts in these areas to anticipate and manage an [uncertain future](#) had come from," Lakoff said.

The pair dug through tomes of historical accounts and records, finding much of it in "the neglected archives of now-forgotten federal government agencies," said Lakoff.

In doing so, they reveal, for the first time, how the country's complex and dispersed emergency system for anticipating and governing emergencies came to be woven together, somewhat unexpectedly, from a variety of theories and planning efforts, much of it based on mobilization for war.

"It turned out that we had to go back to some surprising settings, such as interwar strategic bombing theory, which asked about how to disrupt the vital nodes of enemy industrial production systems, and Cold War nuclear preparedness, which used some of the first digital computers to develop detailed simulations of the likely damage that a future attack would cause," Lakoff said.

History lessons that could help with future

emergencies

The result proves to be a fascinating history lesson, one that could prove invaluable to future generations.

"As we anticipate ever more catastrophic events linked to climate change—hurricanes, floods, wildfires or droughts—it will be important to assess whether our existing system for dealing with emergencies is adequate for the tasks ahead," Lakoff said.

And by unveiling how government has transformed itself to tackle past crises without undermining the country's democratic principles, *The Government of Emergency* provides insight into how best to move forward and address future threats.

And, in fact, the lessons Lakoff and Collier describe for governing emergencies have been adopted beyond the U.S., including the World Health Organization's approach to pandemics and in various humanitarian relief operations.

Lakoff says awareness of past successes should give some comfort to those worried about what tomorrow holds. "Given our current sense of pervasive crisis, including anxiety about [climate change](#), exhaustion from our failures to adequately deal with the pandemic, and ongoing problems of social inequality, there have been previous episodes of existential crisis that the country has in the past managed to address."

And knowing the capabilities and shortcomings of our current system of risk assessment and emergency response—which evolved from our successful responses to such notable emergency situations as the Great Depression, the threat of Nazi Germany and the Cold War—should help us better focus our efforts today.

Provided by University of Southern California

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