

## Website Lesson:

### “Where Is My Government?”

#### Essential Question:

Where Does Personal Responsibility End and Government Responsibility Begin?

-OR-

Where Does Government Responsibility End and Personal Responsibility Begin?

#### Lesson Overview:

In *When the Levees Broke*, a news report shows 62-year-old Florence Jackson waiting for help from FEMA months after Hurricane Katrina. “Where is my government?” she asks. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the U.S. government in providing safety nets for its citizens increased dramatically, with the introduction of Social Security, welfare, Medicare, and other programs. The role of government responsibility in caring for citizens in the wake of natural disasters has increased substantially from a time when it was considered primarily the task of private relief agencies. To what extent is the government obligated to provide immediate and comprehensive relief in these situations? Do government programs place too much reliance on individual preparedness? Does an emphasis on individual responsibility place an undue burden on people least able to take of themselves, such as the poor, disabled, and elderly? Or, conversely, do citizens expect too much of their government in times of crisis? Is the lesson of Katrina that government cannot be relied upon and individuals and grassroots organizations must assume a greater role in planning for future crises?

#### Relevant Sections of the Film:

Act One, Chapter 2 – God’s Will

Act One, Chapter 3 – Explosions

Act One, Chapter 5 – The Cajun Navy

Act One, Chapter 6 – The City That Care Forgot

Act Two, Chapter 3 – Brownie, You’re Doin’ a Heck of a Job

Act Two, Chapter 4 – The Mayor Call-In

Act Two, Chapter 5—Russell Honore

Act Four, Chapter 4 – Where Is My Government?

Act Four, Chapter 5 – A Signature Moment

#### Lesson/Activities:

##### Part 1 – Role-Playing Activity

1. Ask students to examine the Department of Security’s emergency preparedness website at <[www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)>. When they access the site, they must click on “Ready America,” the

section for individual citizens. Ask students to survey the website, including the sections on “Get a Kit,” “Make a Plan,” “Be Informed,” “Get a Kit Checklist,” “Ready Brochure,” “Family Emergency Plan,” “Older Americans,” and “People With Disabilities.” Ask students to give their general impressions of how helpful they think the site would be for helping individuals prepare for emergencies.

2. Next, ask students to look more closely at the “Get a Kit” section of the website. If you do not have access to the Internet, you may use the handout below, which reproduces that section of the website:

### **Recommended Items to Include in a Basic Emergency Supply Kit:**

When preparing for a possible emergency situation, it's best to think first about the basics of survival: **fresh water, food, clean air and warmth.**

- . **Water**, one gallon of water per person per day for at least three days, for drinking and sanitation
- . **Food**, at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food
- . Battery-powered or hand crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert and extra batteries for both
- . Flashlight and extra batteries
- . **First aid kit**
- . Whistle to signal for help
- . **Dust mask**, to help filter contaminated air and plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter-in-place
- . Moist towelettes, garbage bags and plastic ties for personal sanitation
- . Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- . Can opener for food (if kit contains canned food)
- . Local maps

### **Additional Items to Consider Adding to an Emergency Supply Kit:**

- . Prescription medications and glasses
- . Infant formula and diapers
- . Pet food and extra water for your pet
- . Important family documents such as copies of insurance policies, identification and bank account records in a waterproof, portable container
- . Cash or traveler's checks and change
- . Emergency reference material such as a first aid book or information from [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)
- . Sleeping bag or warm blanket for each person. Consider additional bedding if you live in a cold-weather climate.
- . Complete change of clothing including a long sleeved shirt, long pants and sturdy shoes. Consider additional clothing if you live in a cold-weather climate.
- . Household chlorine bleach and medicine dropper – When diluted nine parts water to

one part bleach, bleach can be used as a disinfectant. Or in an emergency, you can use it to treat water by using 16 drops of regular household liquid bleach per gallon of water. Do not use scented, color safe or bleaches with added cleaners.

- . Fire Extinguisher
- . Matches in a waterproof container
- . Feminine supplies and personal hygiene items
- . Mess kits, paper cups, plates and plastic utensils, paper towels
- . Paper and pencil
- . Books, games, puzzles or other activities for children

3. Assign students to work individually or in small groups assuming the following roles (each group will address questions asked in #4, below):

1. A married professional who lives in a privately-owned home with his wife, two children, two dogs, and two cars.
2. A single man in his 20s working at a minimum-wage job and living in a small rental apartment. He has a bank account, but no car and no credit cards.
3. An elderly woman living alone on a fixed income in a small rental apartment and suffering from diabetes.
4. A single mother living in a rental apartment with her three young children. She works two minimum-wage jobs and does not have a car, a bank account, or any credit cards.
5. A college student living in an off-campus apartment with two roommates.

4. Distribute the following list of questions to each group. Ask each student/group to record their answers.

### **ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY: QUESTIONS**

#### **Your Group's Role:**

1. How likely is it that you would see this list or this website, or any government publications about emergency preparedness?

2. How likely do you think it is that you will spend any time at all planning for emergencies, or are you more likely to assume that in the event of an emergency someone else will be taking care of you?

3. How many people would you personally be responsible for providing these items and general emergency planning for?

4. Estimate how much all these supplies would cost in total. Can you afford to buy them? If you have to make choices, which items (if any) would you be most likely to buy? Which items seem the most reasonable and realistic?

5. Do you have room to store these items? Given the type of home you live in, how reasonable is it to expect that you would be able to store them?

6. How helpful would these items be during the following emergencies:

--A blackout that lasts 2 days:

--A fire:

--A flood:

--An earthquake:

--A terrorist attack:

7. Read the "Make a Plan" section of the ready.gov website, if you have access to it. How likely is it that you would make a plan?

8. How likely would you be to evacuate if a mandatory evacuation order were given? What circumstances might it depend on? Would you evacuate if the order were optional?

9. How would you summarize the effectiveness of the government's preparedness information for your role?

5. Poll each group about its findings. (You may wish to limit each group's contribution to a brief discussion of question #9 on the handout.)

6. Based on each group's answers, ask the class as a whole to discuss what conclusions they can draw about which groups (if any) are most likely to prepare for an emergency. Given those conclusions, does government (local, state and federal) have a responsibility to make specific provisions for those least likely or least able to prepare? Should any distinction be made between those who simply do not prepare and those who are unable to prepare? Does the government place too much emphasis on individual preparedness as part of its overall emergency preparedness efforts? Is the government shirking its responsibilities by asking individuals to prepare in this manner? How big an impact is such planning likely to have in the event of a real emergency?

## Part 2 – Discussion of Government Role in Responding to Natural Disasters

1. Distribute the following handout of poll results to students:

### POLLING DATA: FEDERAL RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA

#### POLL 1

*Do you think the federal government should have been better prepared to deal with a storm of this size, or do you think it was as prepared as it reasonably could have been?*

<i>Should Have Been Better Prepared</i>	<i>67%</i>
<i>Prepared As Could Have Been</i>	<i>31%</i>
<i>Unsure</i>	<i>2%</i>

(Source: ABC News/Washington Post Poll, Sept. 2, 2005)

## POLL 2

*As far as you know, do you think federal government officials did a good job or a poor job preparing for Hurricane Katrina before it hit?*

<i>Good Job</i>	22%
<i>Poor Job</i>	69%
<i>Unsure</i>	9%

(Source: CBS News Poll, September 6-7, 2005)

## POLL 3

*Do you think FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, responded adequately to Hurricane Katrina, or could it have done much better?*

<i>Adequate</i>	24%
<i>Could Have Done Much Better</i>	70%
<i>Unsure</i>	6%

(Source: CBS News Poll, September 6-7, 2005)

## POLL 4

*Which comes closer to your view about the government agencies in New Orleans responsible for dealing with natural disasters? They should have been better prepared to deal with the hurricane. OR, There was no way for them to adequately prepare for a hurricane that strong.*

<i>Better Prepared</i>	71%
<i>No Way to Adequately Prepare</i>	28%
<i>Unsure</i>	1%

(Source: CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll, September 8-11, 2005).

Discuss briefly: Based on this polling data, how would students characterize the general public's feelings about how much responsibility the federal government has for preparing for natural disasters and assisting the public in the aftermath of natural disasters?

2. According to the Brookings Institution, "Help Victims of Human and Natural-Made Disasters" ranks as #43 on a list of the U.S. "*Government's 50 Greatest Priorities of the Next Half Century.*" A brief history of the federal government's role in providing emergency relief is available at:

<http://www.brook.edu/GS/CPS/50ge/endeavors/helpvictimsdisaster.htm>

It is reprinted below and may be distributed to students as a handout:

## **GOVERNMENT'S 50 GREATEST ENDEAVORS:**

### **Help Victims of Natural and Human-Made Disasters**

Action to assist in disaster relief, prevention, and risk sharing

Source: The Brookings Institution

#### **Major Statutes:**

- . 1950 PL 81-875 Disaster Relief Act
- . 1956 PL 84-1016 National Flood Insurance Program
- . 1958 PL 85-500 Flood Control Act
- . 1968 PL 90-448 Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 (National Flood Insurance Program)
- . 1968 PL 90-259 Fire Research and Safety Act
- . 1974 PL 93-498 Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act
- . 1979 Federal Emergency Management Agency established

#### **Summary of Government Efforts:**

The federal government has endeavored to decrease the damage and suffering man-made and natural disasters inflict on the United States. Several laws have been passed in order to strengthen the emergency management, government readiness and response in order to come up with a comprehensive natural disaster plan. These laws have endeavored to make the United States' response to natural disasters as quick and as fair as possible to lessen the hardships of those affected.

The first legislation that dealt with disaster relief was passed by the federal government in the form of the Congressional Act of 1803. This act was in response to a fire that did extensive damage in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. As recovery efforts severely taxed community and state resources, Portsmouth's citizens sought federal relief. Between 1803 and 1950, more than 100 disasters of various types across the nation were fought with federal resources. During World War II, a Civil Defense department was established to respond to disasters and maintain civil preparedness. The Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 created the Federal Civil Defense Agency which established the framework for the federal civil defense policy that was used during the 1950's and also provided monetary assistance to states for preparedness activities. The principal focus of this act

was protection from nuclear attack but also included plans that dealt with the emergency management and response strategy in case of a natural or man-made disaster.

On September 30, 1950, Congress passed the Federal Disaster Relief Act. This act was designed primarily to allow the federal government to provide limited relief to the states during times of man-made or natural disaster. This act included assistance to alleviate hardships and damages as well as to repair essential public facilities after a major disaster, and to encourage states to develop a disaster plan. The 1950 Disaster Relief Act gave the local and state governments the first line of official responsibility after a disaster occurs, made the federal response automatic and, for the first time, provided federal agencies the authority to coordinate inter-governmental relief efforts.

In 1968, the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) [<http://www.fema.gov/nfip>] was established. The NFIP protects high risk flood areas by backing communities that agree to specific standards in reducing future flood damage. National Flood Insurance is available in more than 19,000 communities across the United States and its territories.

The Fire Research and Safety Act of 1968 established the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control to investigate the problems with fire the United States was facing and make recommendations. In 1973, this commission issued a report titled "America Burning" which recommended drastic measures to lessen the danger fire posed to the United States and called for the establishment of a United States Fire Administration and a national fire training academy. The Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974 incorporated the "America Burning" recommendations in establishing the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration within the U.S. Department of Commerce (now the United States Fire Administration (USFA) [<http://www.usfa.fema.gov>]).

By the mid 1970's the federal response to disasters and emergencies was diffused between more than 100 different government agencies from the Department of Defense to the General Services Administration. With many services duplicated at the state and local levels, President Jimmy Carter passed an executive order in 1979 that merged many of the agencies involved in emergency preparedness and response into a new Federal Management Agency (FEMA) [<http://www.fema.gov>] that would coordinate disaster relief by setting up disaster assistance centers to deliver aid in effected communities. The mission of FEMA is to provide leadership and support in times of disaster, reduce the loss of life and property, and protect the nation from all types of hazards. Today, FEMA is a 2,500 person agency that has over 5,000 disaster reservists who can be called into action at a moment's notice.

After students have read the document, briefly discuss with them how the role of government in providing disaster relief, particularly at the federal level, changed in the past century.

4. Does the level of government and/or personal responsibility differ depending on which phase of a disaster/emergency is taking place? Discuss how much responsibility you believe should fall on the government and how much on individuals during each of the following phases:

- General preparedness and physical protection before any specific event – for example, building levees, designating escape routes and emergency shelters, stockpiling medicines, etc.
- Making provisions for evacuation and protection when an actual event is imminent – for example, opening and stocking shelters, ordering an evacuation and setting up evacuation routes, providing transportation for evacuation, etc. (Please see the two documents relating to automobile ownership in New Orleans, above.)
- Rescuing individuals after an event has taken place
- Providing long-term assistance for return of evacuees, interim housing, rebuilding of destroyed homes, providing employment, providing medical services (including mental health support), for victims, etc.

(You may wish to use the following chart to help students organize their response to this question. Ask students to rank from 1-5 which group they think bears the most responsibility for each phase of a natural disaster or emergency (1 being the most responsibility; 5 being the least). After students have completed the chart, discuss findings.)

	Federal Govt.	State Govt.	Local Govt.	Community/ Religious/ Private Groups	Individuals/ Families
General Preparedness Ahead of Time					
Preparing When Event is Imminent					
Rescuing Individuals During/Immediately after event					

Providing Long-term Assistance					
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5. Given that most Americans seem to believe that the federal government shares a large burden of providing for emergency relief for its citizens, yet most do not believe the federal government performed admirably before, during, and after Katrina, what do students believe are the implications for future emergencies? Do they believe the government will be better prepared “next time,” or do they believe that based on the government’s performance during Katrina, they should assume more responsibility for themselves if and when a future disaster strikes? Ask students to consider whether the ultimate lesson of Katrina is that government cannot be relied upon to do everything in an emergency – or that government needs to improve its planning for future emergencies? Depending on your answer, where does this leave individuals? Are individuals ultimately responsible for their own survival, or do they have a right to rely on their government for their survival?

**Closure:** Is it reasonable to expect that the government will take care of all citizens after a natural or other disaster? Why or why not? Are there things individuals simply cannot do to prepare? Has the experience of Katrina influenced the way you will personally react during an emergency? Does the responsibility of the government vary based on the resources available to individuals; i.e., does the government has more of a responsibility to take care of those least able to take care of themselves, or should it treat all citizens equally when disasters strike?

**Enrichment Activities:**

1. Ask students to draw up their own emergency plan. Do they assume their parents or college will make plans for them? How might the experience of Katrina have changed their minds about how much planning they should do?
2. Ask students to research the disaster preparedness and emergency management systems of other countries, particularly Western European democracies, and how they compare with those of the United States.
3. Ask students to research the Citizen Corps website at [www.citizencorps.gov](http://www.citizencorps.gov). How effective do they think local Citizen Corps Councils can be in helping prepare for emergencies. Is this type of undertaking helpful in enlisting the support of individual citizens, or is it asking private citizens to do what government should do on its own?

**Additional Resources:**

Gregory A. Thomas, Freedom from Fear: A guide to safety, preparedness, and the threat of terrorism (Random House, 2005).