

Gov't Is NOT the Problem

Michael Sean Winters | May. 13, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The scenes of devastation along the mighty Mississippi are heartbreaking: The farms that have been inundated with flood waters to spare a city, the homes, all of them poorer, too close to the river and in danger of being swept away, the reigniting of flooding fears in New Orleans and that most haunting question that city ever faces, "Will the levee hold?" Coming so soon after an unprecedented number of tornados swept through the South just a few weeks ago, leaving death and destruction in their wake, this new crisis shows once again how vulnerable we human beings are.

After disasters such as the flooding and the tornados strike, of course, people need help. Much of the immediate assistance is local: Firemen and EMTs rush to evacuate people from homes threatened by the onrushing waters of the flood or pick through the debris left by a tornado, looking for survivors and getting them to a hospital. The Red Cross flies in supplies. State troopers work with local law enforcement to prevent looting. Local churches and union halls become makeshift shelters for the displaced.

But, the devastation is not only physical and the response cannot only be local. The federal government must be brought in. Sometimes the federal government is needed to help cope with the physical consequences of the disaster, which may overwhelm local resources. But, even if the local authorities can do the clean-up of the physical debris, the fiscal mess a storm creates needs federal assistance. In a complex, interstate economy, only the federal government can guarantee financial assistance in a way that sticks, freeing up insurance companies to expedite payments, helping those whose insurance does not cover all the damage, giving confidence to the contractors who will do the work that they will be paid, allowing state and local officials to worry about providing help and not worry about covering the cost of that help.

Many of the states affected by the flooding happen to be governed by politicians that have made a lifetime criticizing the federal government. They suggest, first, that its powers are strictly limited, that it should be much smaller and much less engaged in various strata of our economy than it is. Secondly, they argue that government messes up everything it touches, government is inefficient and anti-business, and that is another reason we should want less of it. But, of course, in the face of these enormous challenges, these acts of God, they too turn to the federal government for succor. They recognize that in the face of a catastrophe such as record high floodwaters or devastating tornados, only the federal government can marshal the resources to alleviate the suffering. And, they put out their hand. A blessing on President Obama for not spitting on that hand.

I do not think these politicians in the South who decry big government but then turn to it in their hour of need are hypocritical. I think they are ignorant. I think they do not know what it has been like to be middle class these past few decades. They do not know what it is like to have your wages stagnate or decline while the prices at the grocer's and the gas pump continue to rise. They do not know what it is like to not have health care, to live with an ailment because you can't afford to get it fixed, to fear for your child's health and not get simple, inexpensive, preventive care because you can't afford even that. They do not know what it is like to be homeless in a place with few or no services for the indigent. They do not know what it is like to work with a boss who sexually harasses you or fails to pay all he owes you or otherwise infringes on your rights as a worker

because you have no union to protect you. In short, the devastation of the floods and the tornadoes is sudden and overwhelming, and the economic devastation the middle and working classes have faced over the past several decades is glacial and incremental, but the devastation is no less real.

Ever since Ronald Reagan said, "Government is the problem," some conservative politicians have played on this anti-government theme. They do not see how government can, and must, in full conformity with the principle of subsidiarity, step in to alleviate the glacial suffering as well as the sudden suffering, to not only rebuild a levee but to help rebuild local economies when the plant gets shipped overseas, to help those who are made homeless by reason of unemployment as well as those made homeless by a tornado, to get medical help to the child buried in the debris of a flooded home and to the child of a family buried in the debris of a "right-to-work," post-NAFTA, post-modern economy.

Most politicians do not know this world of slow, incremental suffering. Most politicians get involved in politics because they can afford to do so. Their success in the economy tends to convince them of their moral superiority as well: I recall the funniest political cartoon in history from the 1964 campaign in the New Yorker, that showed Barry Goldwater walking by what would have then been called a bum or a vagrant, and Goldwater says, "If that guy had any gumption, he would inherit a department store chain like the rest of us." This is now a bi-partisan phenomenon. President Obama's economic advisors do not know much about privation but they know a lot about private schools, which is one reason their arguments on behalf of programs that help the poor ring so hollow and unpersuasive: They know in a wonky sort of way why anti-poverty programs are important, but they don't know in their gut why those programs are important.

Government is not, as Reagan said, "the problem" which is not to say that government is not often problematic. Nor, would I suggest that government is the only solution to any given problem. Nor, would I suggest that government, especially the federal government, is the solution of first resort to any given problem. But, to take the issue of health care, for decade after decade, millions of Americans have not had access to adequate health care because they had no access to health insurance. Those who invoke subsidiarity to oppose Obama's health care reform may have a political or even an economic point, but their moral argument fails: How many more millions of fellow citizens need go without health care before they concluded that the private sector could not, in fact, achieve universal health insurance? Just because you can't see them or don't know them, does not mean the uninsured do not exist, nor that their dignity is not wounded, deeply wounded, by their inability to afford health care for themselves and their families. Could the market provide universal health care more efficiently than the government? No way to know because the market has not done so. It has failed. And government must step in.

I am sorry for those fellow Americans whose homes or livelihoods have been harmed by these floods and for the families who lost loved ones in the tornadoes. I am also sorry for the man who lost his \$40 per hour job two decades ago, went to all the re-training programs, but found that he was being retrained for jobs that paid only \$25 per hour, and who now can't even find a minimum wage job. I am also sorry for the young couple who are expecting their second child, but the husband's unemployment benefits are running out, and the COBRA payments for health care are too high, and the wife's job does not provide health insurance, and they have no idea how they are going to provide for their family. I do not believe these scenes of economic devastation are any less heartbreaking than the scenes we see on television of the towns along the banks of the Mississippi River.

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