



We need to prepare for future today

Posted: Sunday, October 20, 2024

We are a divided country.

If Guinness had a category for the most understated comment of all time, this one might be a top contender.

Whether it's abortion, immigration, gun control, diversity, equity and inclusion, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, health care, or religion, people in this country are increasingly passionate about their disagreements.

Underlying many of the contentious issues is an ongoing debate over the appropriate role of government in our lives.

One area, however, where there should be broad consensus regarding legislative involvement relates to preparing for 'natural' disasters. The truth is what we witnessed in Florida and along the East Coast a couple of weeks ago was neither arbitrary nor capricious; it was the logical consequence of processes that are clearly understood and entirely predictable.

As human beings continue to cause the earth's temperature to rise dramatically, the catastrophes we are now experiencing on a regular basis will only get worse. In fact, we have probably passed the point where we can stop the inevitable.

All we can do is try to mitigate the damage that's already been done and slow its irreversible impact on our environment and, consequently, our lives.

Will preparing for the future be expensive? Absolutely; installing surge-barrier systems along our coastal cities would cost hundreds of billions of dollars, regardless of the engineering employed.

But it can be done. Movable seawalls such as the Thames Barrier in London have a proven track record. In service since 1982, the main steel gates span over 1700 feet and rise five stories above sea level when deployed. The system effectively ended flooding along the Thames.

What we need to remember is that the cost of not acting will ultimately prove much higher than the expense associated with continually dealing with the fallout. Hurricanes Milton and Helene caused a minimum of \$50 billion in damages. And they were just two storms.

Only the federal government can provide the kind of protection needed; the private sector has neither the desire nor the resources to tackle such a monumental and expensive undertaking.

Think about it. Business and industry won't even spend the money needed to secure their own networks; they'd rather do perpetual clean-up than fix the problem.

As inconceivable as this may seem to many, some things are simply more important than individual freedom or promoting an unrestrained free market.

Sadly, many Americans no longer seem capable of seeing the big picture or thinking in the long-term. They want the greatest return in the shortest amount of time for the least amount of effort.

When ‘natural’ disasters strike, those most affected shouldn’t have to depend primarily on their own assets to mount an effective recovery. Once upon a time, Americans had a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of our fellow citizens, irrespective of their political leanings.

I believe resolutely in free enterprise. Unlike many conservatives, however, I am also acutely aware of its inherent limitations. Not everything is, or should be, about generating a profit.

Did the free market abolish slavery? Did the free market desegregate our schools? Did the free market secure the vote for women? Closer to home, did the free market pay for my mother’s cancer treatment (over half a million dollars) during the last two years of her life?

The challenges facing this country are enormous and complex; we’ve simply got to find a way to get beyond the naïve and simple-minded notion that our only options for dealing with adversity - either as a nation or as individuals - are self-reliance and charity.

Simply put, I don’t want to live in a world where facing hardship involves fending for yourself or relying on the voluntary generosity of others.

The United States needs to join the rest of the world in taking the long view. When it comes to dealing with ‘natural’ disasters that are entirely predictable, or helping individuals face overwhelming personal crises, an ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure.

On that we should not be divided.



— *Aaron W. Hughey is a university distinguished professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.*

www.bgdailynews.com