

KeyOpinion

Myth, Math and Aftermath

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

*Ob the rains will fall,
And the winds will blow,
With the trees all falling down,
But when calm returns,
The citizen learns
Who cleans up the mess in town.*

Political idealists tell us that government exists to do for individuals that which they cannot do for themselves.

That is a myth.

In reality, at the state level, government most often manifests its talents in creating imaginative ways to milk the taxpayer and enhance the careers of lobbyists.

It's true that Washington supplies the armed forces and manages relationships with other countries around the world — functions which the fifty individual states could not undertake with reasonable facility.

But one of the national government's creations is the Federal Emergency Management Administration — FEMA — an organization that spreads the burden and benefits of disaster relief over the whole of the United States, like a combination Red Cross and disaster insurer on steroids.

As everyone knows by now, FEMA astonished the world by the manner in which it came to the aid of the Gulf states in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina last year.

In the aftermath of the storm, it dithered and wasted valuable time in dispatching rescue assistance. Then, in a profligate example of math run wild, FEMA lavished tens of millions of dollars, with very little to show for it.

As the president observed, the head of that agency did "a heckuva job," although whether or not that phrase was a compliment or a criticism depends on what is meant by "heckuva."

Now we have begun a new hurricane season, and FEMA has made two significant pronouncements. The first is that individual communities are "on their own" as

far as immediate assistance is concerned, and the second is that after a storm has passed, FEMA will then come in and render assistance, including reimbursement to the community for clearing debris from its public roads.

The latter information is of paramount concern to local communities, where many of the condominium and residential units are in "gated" communities, the thoroughfares of which do not constitute "public" roads.

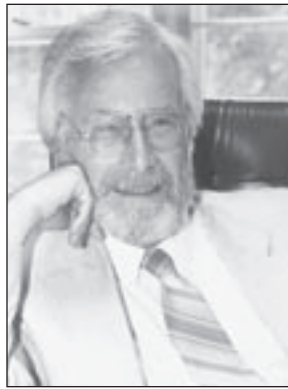
In the Town of Longboat Key alone, the town manager has reported that there are at least 70 condominium associations that fall into the "private" category. Since FEMA will not rule on compensability until well after the fact of clean-up, it is questionable as to when and to what degree the town will be reimbursed.

The problem is not unlike that existing in many northern communities after a snow storm or blizzard.

With roads blocked after a major snowfall, most local authorities display the attitude exemplified by Revolutionary War Admiral David Farragut, who uttered the famous order: "Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead!"

Even before the snow stops falling, snowplows are directed to all thoroughfares, private as well as public. The rationale is that regardless of weather, public safety requires that ambulances, fire engines and other emergency vehicles be assured of access to individual dwellings.

The practice is not extended, however, to private driveways or commercial establishments, which are left to make their own arrangements. In those instances, government does not intervene, as such situations are considered examples of tasks the individual citizen is capable of "doing for himself," notwithstanding the protests of many an aching middle-aged back.



Acting over a period of several meetings, Longboat Key adopted a plan whereby a "first push" would push aside all hurricane debris from the island's main thoroughfares.

Subsequent efforts would involve picking up and removing debris from alongside any roadway, public or private, regardless of whether ultimate reimbursement was forthcoming. Private drives leading into complexes would be cleared, at the discretion of the town manager, only if public safety required it.

It would be necessary and prudent, of course, to secure advance permission from associations in gated communities, so as not to be in the capacity of trespassers. The town attorney will also likely recommend "hold harmless" provisions to protect the Town in the event of collateral damage during debris removal.

None of this is without precedent on Longboat Key, since the Town went through somewhat similar paths relative to beach renourishment and canal dredging, obtaining easements from individual homeowners and foregoing the contribution of federal funds.

It seems that acting independently, without too much reliance on "Big Brother," does not come cheap. But no one ever said that governance was easy.

Longboat's advance hurricane planning is something Manatee and Sarasota counties might do well to emulate.

Who knows? If all goes well, Washington may one day announce: "Southwest Florida, you've done a heckuva job!"

**Do not let debris
Keep us up a tree;
Put the clean-up crews to work.
On a future day,
Though we may have to pay,
It's a duty that we cannot shirk.**

Richard L. Hershatter is a retired lawyer and novelist who writes a syndicated column in interest to Floridians. He can be reached at Banyan502@aol.com.

Another Inconvenient Truth

Tom Burgum
Contributing Columnist

Campaign season is now upon us and prepare yourself to hear the usual litany of political promises. The candidates, both incumbents and challengers, will prove to be a diverse group of people. Some will prove to be serious adults speaking the truth, others will prove to be liars, some will show intelligence while others will prove to be dummies.

But all of them will trot out a series of proven applause lines and promises — none of which will ever be fulfilled. "I'll work to balance the budget" or "I'll find ways to cut government waste" are two of the perennial favorites. Fixing the broken public school system has been around for a while and is big with the SUV mothers. The new champion on the block, the one to invariably evoke a positive response is — "I'll work to make American energy independent in this decade."

Hold your applause, the inconvenient truth is it is not going to happen. Energy independence is one of the most over-used and misleading phrases in the English language. Politicians have used it as an applause line since the 1970's. President Nixon called for a program that would make us energy independent by the end of the decade (1980). It failed within two years, as did President Carter's energy initiative in 1978 and President Clinton's initiative in 1995.

Despite the abysmal record of failures in the energy initiative field, our erstwhile leaders continue to pump this well dry. President Bush has called for less dependence on Mideast oil and has suggested a program of more energy production in the United States, expanding refinery capacity, assisting in the design and licensing of nuclear power plants, and research and deployment of alternative energy programs. On June 27, the Washington Post reported that Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass) "decried more than two decades of government inaction to lessen dependence on Middle East oil." He blistered both parties with conducting "politics at its worst — ducking the difficult choices, giving in to the big contributors,

substituting words for deeds, postponing the reckoning until the day after tomorrow." Even Kerry's critics would find it hard to argue with him on that one.

Bush and Kerry aside, there is absolutely no chance the United States will be energy independent in the next 50 years, or maybe ever. The Wall Street Journal quoted Jason Grumet, executive director of the non-partisan National Commission on Energy Policy, as saying, "Energy independence is an emotionally compelling concept but it's a vestige of a world that no longer exists." Indeed, despite the abundance of rhetoric since Nixon first weighed-in the United States has become much more dependent on foreign supplies. Despite all the talk, the WS Journal reported that over the last decade America's energy consumption has increased by more than 12% while domestic production has increased by less than 0.5%. The difference was made up by oil imports. In 1973, when Nixon first talked of energy independence, 35% of the nation's petroleum supplies were imported. Now the figure is 59% in the first four months of 2006 according to the Department of Energy. Part of this increase can be attributed to the fact we have deeded Alaska to the Caribou and our coastline to the beach dwellers.

The idea that acceptable alternative energy sources can make any kind of a significant contribution is nothing short of ridiculous. Hybrid automobiles are the latest fad but their promise remains unfulfilled. Automakers are even cutting back production because hybrids are not selling well. Electric cars were a mirage, as few would buy a car with a top speed of 60 mph and a range of 100 miles. Even if they had fulfilled their great promise did anyone wonder where the electricity to charge the batteries would come from? The uncomfortable



answer is — natural gas or coal fired power plants. Can you even imagine the outcry from the environmental benches with the increased use of coal. Al Gore might even make another movie.

Fuel-cells are expensive and still decades away from being operationally reliable but they do have promise for the future. Wind and solar can make a small contribution but current technology severely limits their ability to be major players in any energy independence effort, at least in the next two decades. There is no public transportation infrastructure in the United States, at least worthy of the name.

The non-acceptable alternative sources are nuclear and coal gasification. Our political class steers clear of these more controversial energy alternatives and this avoidance, if nothing else, proves they are not serious in the quest for energy independence. If the politicians, or the voters, were really serious we could follow the lead of the French who produce nearly 80% of their electricity through nuclear generation. But don't bet we will. Our abundance of coal could be used to make oil and gasoline as the Germans did in World War Two but this will not be economically feasible until gas prices reach \$4.50 or \$5. No politician has the stomach to tell the voter we can have a plentiful supply of gasoline at \$5.00 a gallon.

There are real solutions but like much of reality they may well be politically unacceptable. Paul Verleger, an energy economist and senior fellow at the institute for international Economics, was quoted in USA Today, "I don't think it's realistic to think that any politician that's currently running for president or who might contemplate running for president in the next eight years would be able to advocate the steps necessary to lessen our dependence."

He added, "Among those steps: raising gasoline taxes to cut consumption." You won't hear a candidate suggest higher gasoline taxes, coal gasification or nuclear power. These are real solutions but another inconvenient truth

Burgum, Page 8A