



Some Thoughts on Frankenstorm

“Frankenstorm,” the worst storm in American history, is currently beating down upon my home state of New Jersey. As I write this, there is rain and wind, but nothing in the least bit remarkable — at least not as far as weather goes in my neck of the woods of the Garden State.

Still, I continue to be told by media personalities and Facebook friends that this storm promises to visit havoc upon the northeastern United States the likes of which it has never before experienced. To hear people talk — including and especially those who talk about these matters for a living — one could be forgiven for thinking that it is nothing less than Armageddon that is coming our way.

I offer some thoughts.



(1) Virtually everything that we have been hearing about Hurricane Sandy for the better part of a week has been hyperbole — pure and simple. To be sure, the meteorologists were correct in identifying this storm for the historically unusual phenomenon that it promises to be. But that everything else that they have been saying ever since has been a textbook case of sensationalism becomes obvious once we consider the bare fact that *nothing else beyond the weather forecast needed to be said*.

Round-the-clock predictions regarding power outages lasting seven to ten days and other similarly grisly prognostications do nothing but promote hysteria.

Some will object that incessant coverage of Sandy is necessary in order to save human life. To this, we need only note that animals don't need to be told to protect themselves against threats. Anyone with an IQ above two knows, or should know, that if there is just a decent chance that a hurricane is heading in his direction, then he needs to do his best to guard against it. By bombarding them with inexhaustible coverage of a life-threatening event, no network does its viewers any favors if those viewers are in harm's way.

Such coverage generates panic, and panic reduces the capacity for sober judgment. This is one respect in which excessive media coverage of Sandy and the like potentially imperils viewers.

It is bad enough when one person panics. But it is infinitely worse when a whole bunch of people do so. The creation of mass panic is the second sense in which the media may actually do more harm than good in spending all of their time talking about “Frankenstorm” and the like.

The third respect in which the media may imperil those who it ostensibly wants to assist is in consuming all of viewers' attention with their sensationalistic coverage of disasters! Those who are threatened by Sandy or whatever else need to spend less time watching television and more time actually preparing to meet the threat!



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on October 30, 2012

(2) Modern Westerners, at least since the time of the Enlightenment (and probably earlier), are politically peculiar creatures. With the rise of the centralized modern state, the politics of Western peoples have assumed a distinctive form.

Politics, as we have always known it, is an engagement in *crisis-management*.

Government, in our political universe, exists in order to supply “solutions” to “problems.”

What this means is that, intoxicated by the sea of power that lies at the disposal of modern governments — a measure of power that would have been unimaginable to rulers of earlier eras — we inescapably find ourselves forever oscillating between two extremes, each of which is inseparable from the other. On the one hand, we suppose that there is no problem, however dismal, that our government can’t put out to pasture. That is, whether comprehensively or in detail, we are hopelessly utopian. On the other hand, we just as readily suppose that disasters of one sort or the other are never more than millimeters away from devouring our way of life.

To put it simply, we never fail to ignore the old adage that if something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Yet we also ignore another piece of wisdom: If something sounds too *bad* to be true, it usually is.

These two propensities are inextricably linked to one another: We need to reduce life to an endless series of crises if we are to sustain our belief in government, for government exists to relieve us of these troubles.

There can be no savior if there aren’t monsters from which we need saving.

Now, Hurricane Sandy, or, more precisely, *the coverage of Hurricane Sandy*, fits seamlessly into this understanding of politics and government. The biggest storm of all time can be met only by the biggest government of all time — or at least an activist government well disposed to protecting citizens from themselves.

(3) Consideration (2) explains why we seem to simultaneously dread and relish in events like Sandy. The media, politicians, and, yes, the rest of us, effortlessly accommodate Sandy, for crisis is the stuff of which modern Western life is made, and Sandy — or at least Sandy as it is being depicted — is a crisis *par excellence*.

(4) Yet in addition to the psychic satisfactions that all modern Westerners receive from reckoning with epic disasters, politicians and media personalities reap other kinds of benefits.

Media figures, obviously, reap ratings, *lots* of ratings. This translates into ever bigger bucks. It also means something of a legacy for those commentators and meteorologists who can claim to have covered, or who are remembered for having covered, “the largest storm of our time.”

The rewards to which politicians can look forward, however, are — what else? — political. As President Obama’s former White House Chief of Staff, Rahm Emmanuel, once said: “You never want to let a good crisis go to waste.” A crisis, Emmanuel explained, permits politicians opportunities to do things — i.e. grow government — that they wouldn’t have had otherwise.

Crises exist to be exploited, and the greater the crisis, the greater the opportunities for political exploitation. This is why politicians have an invested interest in seeing to it that every troubling situation be spun so as to sound like the end times: The greater the disaster the greater the need for a Messiah — the greater the need for ever larger government.



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None of this, of course, is to deny that Sandy will have done its share of damage. And none of it is meant to deny that those whose lives were impacted by it are deserving of our prayers and support. But all natural disasters, from thunder and lightning storms to snow storms and blizzards, are damaging.

The forgoing points stand.



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