



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on August 19, 2010

Command Centers and Our Liberties

The natural yen of our government to collect information on its citizens and to create command centers to review that information has continued to grow since September 11, 2001. Some of these efforts focus purely on terrorism, but others extend broadly into every area of American life, and seldom are they efficacious.

The increasing tendency to create command centers and to collect vast amounts of information can slow down rather than speed up the response to disasters. Natural disasters, for example, are facts of life. We have very limited power to prevent these disasters and often only modest means to respond to the disasters. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and the like are simply part of man living on a planet with much bigger muscles than humans will ever have. The snail's pace of public response to Katrina and to the Gulf oil leak suggests that government, especially the federal government, is much less suited to a rapid response to disasters than private charities, churches, or good neighbors. In the Gulf oil leak, the federal government, with its almost incomprehensible web of rules and of bureaus slowed down what Louisianans wanted to do to protect their shores.



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When snowstorms or other weather events shut down power lines for sections of cities, the first and best line of defense is the individual household. A good supply of flashlights, candles, potable water, heating devices independent of the electric power grid, and so forth spells the difference between inconvenience and serious peril. Unless government intends to mandate that each home and apartment have such precautionary items and periodically drill citizens in the use of those, there is no role for government at all in that first line of defense. Surely, the motivation of residents to protect their own health and safety is a much better guarantor of wise planning than an officious government bureaucrat.

When the individual homeowner is swept away by flood or fire, who comes first to his aid? Neighbors and those parts of local government, like fire services, which are trained to respond quickly and specifically to problems. (It is interesting to note that in much of America, fire services are provided by volunteer fire departments.) When a fire rages out of control, who comes in to help first? The fire



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departments of nearby cities, which have an interest both in insuring that neighbors help neighbors and also in containing big fires.

What about terrorism and crime? Well, as Arizona has demonstrated, the vast resources of the federal government — on paper greater than those of the State of Arizona — ought to be able to do a better job of keeping illegal immigrants, in whose numbers dwell potential criminals and terrorists, than state officials. Yet the political will to enforce federal immigration law is lacking.

More troubling is the potential danger to individual liberty of collecting more and more essentially private information on citizens for a putative purpose of making us safer. There is little to suggest that federal officials are more trustworthy or less politicized than local governments or private businesses. Horror stories of the unauthorized release of private information from federal sites abound. The silly, scary words of Secretary Napolitano to watch out for right-wing groups and the equally silly, scary suggestions by Speaker Pelosi that Americans who object to a mosque at Ground Zero should be investigated give us all the reason we should need — if we ever needed any reason at all — to be very wary of federal officials going out of their way to collect more and more information about us.



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