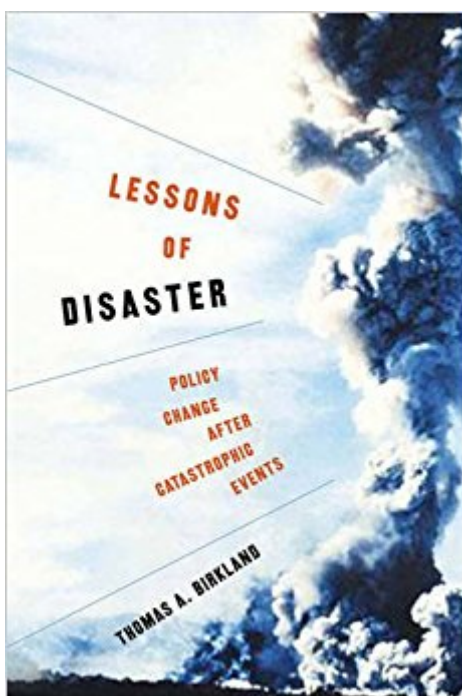


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Lessons Of Disaster: Policy Change After Catastrophic Events (American Government And Public Policy)



Synopsis

Even before the wreckage of a disaster is cleared, one question is foremost in the minds of the public: "What can be done to prevent this from happening again?" Today, news media and policymakers often invoke the "lessons of September 11" and the "lessons of Hurricane Katrina." Certainly, these unexpected events heightened awareness about problems that might have contributed to or worsened the disasters, particularly about gaps in preparation. Inquiries and investigations are made that claim that "lessons" were "learned" from a disaster, leading us to assume that we will be more ready the next time a similar threat looms, and that our government will put in place measures to protect us. In *Lessons of Disaster*, Thomas Birkland takes a critical look at this assumption. We know that disasters play a role in setting policy agendas—*in* getting policymakers to think about problems—but does our government always take the next step and enact new legislation or regulations? To determine when and how a catastrophic event serves as a catalyst for true policy change, the author examines four categories of disasters: aviation security, homeland security, earthquakes, and hurricanes. He explores lessons learned from each, focusing on three types of policy change: change in the larger social construction of the issues surrounding the disaster; instrumental change, in which laws and regulations are made; and political change, in which alliances are created and shifted. Birkland argues that the type of disaster affects the types of lessons learned from it, and that certain conditions are necessary to translate awareness into new policy, including media attention, salience for a large portion of the public, the existence of advocacy groups for the issue, and the preexistence of policy ideas that can be drawn upon. This timely study concludes with a discussion of the interplay of multiple disasters, focusing on the initial government response to Hurricane Katrina and the negative effect the September 11 catastrophe seems to have had on reaction to that tragedy.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Readers interested in disaster policy and emergency management will find Lessons instructive and illuminating. The case studies are contextually rich and demonstrate the relationship between focusing events and disaster policies quite deftly. Moreover, readers will find Birkland's thorough knowledge of the policy process impressive ...a worthwhile resource for grasping how concepts of learning may help explain the fits and starts of U.S. disaster policy making."
—[Public Administration Review](#)
"A valuable book for students of disaster policy and for students of policy change more generally. . . . After reading this book, it is hard not to become an advocate for aggressive disaster mitigation, as opposed to the preponderant paradigm of disaster relief."
—[Perspectives on Politics](#)

"Government is not perfect; we all know that. But governments can and do learn. When policies clearly fail, as happened in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as has occurred with various responses to hurricanes, earthquakes, and aviation security disasters, what happens next? Learning is by no means automatic; groups of affected citizens must mobilize; new ideas must be tossed around and considered; and a consensus must be reached about new policy initiatives. This does not always occur, and governments often do not learn anything even from terrible failures. In this very readable book based on several case studies including public response to the events of 9/11, Birkland shows us how governments draw important lessons from past failures. The book is a useful corrective to complaints that policy failures are there for all to see, but improvements never occur; Birkland shows that governments do, indeed, learn. More importantly, he helps us understand how we might make them learn more."
—[Frank R. Baumgartner, Distinguished Professor of Political Science, The Pennsylvania State University](#)
"Birkland analyzes an understudied topic: the extent to which governments learn after critical events. Often 'event-induced attention' causes policy change, but does this result in policy learning, or do governments simply repeat past errors? In framing an interesting question, and in ably utilizing four case studies to study it, Birkland has written an important book."
—[Bryan Jones, Donald R. Matthews Distinguished Professor of American](#)

Politics, director, Center for American Politics and Public Policy, University of Washington, Seattle" This book is a useful companion to *After Disaster*. Both books look at focusing events like natural disasters, but this also examines the ultimate focusing event (9-11) and whether subsequent bureaucratic change produced meaningful policy change." — Roger W. Cobb, Brown University

Dr. Birkland provides yet another clear look at the policy process and how it works or, as is often the case, doesn't work. Easy to read and understand, so anyone can learn more about political science from it.

It's my textbook. Happy to get it.

Great book. Very very well written and is definitely useful for certain classes. Amazing pictures and very easy to read.

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Great!

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