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## Ky. Voices: In disasters, shared responsibility is government's role

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By Aaron W. Hughey

A debate is currently raging over the appropriate role of government in our lives. Whether its gun control, abortion, welfare or national defense, people in this country are increasingly passionate about our collective future.

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

Will preparing for the inevitable be expensive? Absolutely; it will require hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars. Jeroen Aerts, an expert with the Institute for Environmental Studies in Amsterdam, estimates that installing a surge-barrier system around lower Manhattan alone could cost between \$10 billion and \$22 billion, depending on the design 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 1,700 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 taking action to protect our coastal areas will ultimately prove much higher than the expense associated with taking definitive steps to mitigate the inevitable. According to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, the price tag for Superstorm Sandy could reach \$50 billion.

And that was only one event; many more are no doubt on the horizon.

Only the federal government is in a position to provide this kind of protection; the private sector has neither the desire nor the resources to tackle such a monumental and expensive undertaking. As inconceivable as this may seem to many of my libertarian friends, some things are simply more important than preserving individualism or promoting an unrestrained free market.

Part of the problem is that 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. Then again, one of my grandfather's favorite sayings was "you reap what you sow."

When disasters strike, those most affected should not have to depend primarily on their own resources to mount an effective recovery. To be American is to have a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of fellow citizens.

Is there waste and venality in government? Of course. But unless you've been living in a cave for the last few decades, you know the private sector is equally corrupt.

I believe resolutely in free enterprise. 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? Did the free market pay for my mother's cancer treatment (over a half-million dollars) during the last two years of her life?

The challenges facing this country are obviously enormous and complex. We have 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.

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

There is an appropriate role for government in our lives.

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

**[www.kentucky.com/2013/02/15/2517923/ky-voices-in-disasters-shared.html](http://www.kentucky.com/2013/02/15/2517923/ky-voices-in-disasters-shared.html)**