

The federal role in disaster response dates back to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, when General Funston sent troops from the Presidio to deal with the city's desperate emergency. Governor Romney seems dubious about this century-old federal role. During one of the GOP primary debates, Governor Romney was asked what he thought about the idea of transferring FEMA's responsibilities to the states. This is what he said:

Absolutely. Every time you have an occasion to take something from the federal government and send it back to the states, that's the right direction. And if you can go even further, and send it back to the private sector, that's even better. Instead of thinking, in the federal budget, what we should cut, we should ask the opposite question, what should we keep?

John King, the moderator, then asked, "Including disaster relief, though?" Romney responded: "We cannot — we cannot afford to do those things without jeopardizing the future for our kids."

Perhaps explaining why the federal government should be involved in disaster relief is unnecessary, but just for the record, here are several reasons:

1. Major disasters require more resources than a single state can muster. The federal government has more resources — for instance, national guard from other states, Air Force transport planes, medics, and Coast Guard ships. The Feds can also act as a form of insurance for state governments, spreading the cost of occasional disasters more broadly rather than leaving them on a single state.
2. Major disasters are infrequent — not every state has a disaster every year. For this reason, it makes sense to maintain centralized surge capacity rather than having to duplicate surge capacity in every state.
3. Major disasters have multistate impacts and repercussions. For instance, reopening major roads, airports, and ports is an issue that benefits people in many states. Correspondingly, they should contribute to the necessary effort.
4. A non-economic argument — as fellow citizens, we feel a special sense of obligation to help out each other in face of disaster rather than sitting on our hands.

Federal emergency assistance made sense in 1906, when Teddy Roosevelt was President. It still makes sense today.