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## **Disaster Response and Appointment of a Recovery Czar: The Executive Branch's Response to the Flood of 1927**

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# Disaster Response and Appointment of a Recovery Czar: The Executive Branch's Response to the Flood of 1927

## Summary

In the wake of the destruction caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the press and policymakers have looked to the past for examples of federal responses to natural disasters that might serve as models for emulation today. Some Members of Congress have expressed an interest in creating a cabinet-level “czar” to administer Hurricane Katrina and Rita relief programs. Since the federal response to the flood of 1927 featured Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover as the director of the flood response and wielding immense executive powers, this episode in federal history may be of particular interest to Congress.

This report describes the flood of 1927, and assesses the federal government's response thereto. In short, the federal response was an executive branch response. President Calvin Coolidge created a quasi-governmental commission that included members of his Cabinet and the American National Red Cross. This commission encouraged the public to donate funds to the relief effort. It also gave Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover near-absolute authority to organize and oversee its response. Hoover used this authority to weave together federal resources, American National Red Cross volunteers, and the private sector to carry out the relief and recovery program.

The concentration of power and the blending of the governmental and private sectors in Hoover's hands enabled the relief effort to be carried out expeditiously and creatively. President Coolidge's empowerment of Hoover alone as director of the flood response clarified to federal, state, and local officials and the public who was in charge.

However, this administrative structure was not without costs. There was little direct federal oversight of actual relief provision. So, for example, when local and state relief workers behaved illegally, they were not held accountable. Furthermore, the concentration of power in a single set of hands enabled Secretary Hoover to undertake inadvisable actions with nearly no constraints.

This report is intended to provide background or contextual information and will not be updated.

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# Disaster Response and Appointment of a Recovery Czar: The Executive Branch's Response to the Flood of 1927

## Introduction

In the wake of the destruction caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the press and policymakers have looked to the past for examples of federal responses to natural disasters that might serve as models for emulation today. A number of newspaper articles have referred to the executive branch's response to the 1927 Mississippi River flood.<sup>1</sup> Some Members of Congress have expressed an interest in creating a cabinet-level "czar" to administer Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita relief programs.<sup>2</sup> Since the federal response to the flood of 1927 featured Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover as the director of the flood response and wielding immense executive powers, this episode in federal history may be of particular interest to Congress.

In order to aid policymakers in their consideration of this matter, this report provides an overview of the 1927 flood, and the federal governmental response thereto. In short, the federal response was primarily an executive branch response. President Calvin Coolidge created a quasi-governmental commission that included members of his Cabinet and the American National Red Cross.<sup>3</sup> This commission encouraged the public to donate funds to the relief effort and utilized federal resources, American National Red Cross volunteers, and the private sector to carry out the relief and recovery program. The commission also gave Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover near-absolute authority.

The concentration of power and the blending of the governmental and private sectors in Hoover's hands enabled the relief effort to be carried out expeditiously and creatively. President Coolidge's empowerment of Hoover alone as director of the flood response clarified to federal, state, and local officials and the public who was

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., James R. Lutze, "After the Floods — Not Enough Federal Help in 1927 or 2005," *The News & Observer*, Sept. 13, 2005, p. A13; Daniel Schorr, "What Would Herbert Hoover Do?" *Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 16, 2005, p. 9; David Greenburg, "No Deal," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 2, 2005, p. D1; and Timothy Walch, "We Could Use Another Man Like Herbert Hoover," *History News Network*, Oct. 17, 2005, at [<http://hnn.us/articles/16985.html>].

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Yochi J. Dreazon and Christopher Cooper, "Bill Would Create 'Czar' for Katrina Reconstruction," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 12, 2005, p. B2.

<sup>3</sup> On purely governmental interagency coordinating entities, see CRS Report RL31357, *Federal Interagency Coordinative Mechanisms: Varied Types and Numerous Devices*, by Frederick M. Kaiser.

in charge. As will be seen, historical accounts and assessments of the federal flood response failed to locate any instances of jurisdictional confusion or power struggles between agencies.

However, this administrative structure was not without costs. There was little direct federal oversight of actual relief provision. So, for example, when local and state relief workers behaved illegally, they were not held accountable. Furthermore, the concentration of power in a single set of hands enabled Secretary Hoover to undertake inadvisable actions with nearly no constraints.

## The Mississippi River Flood of 1927

Nineteen-twenty-seven was not the first year that the Mississippi River overflowed. The river

had its own natural cycle, usually flooding in the spring and again in early summer ... then settling back into its bed during late summer .... People who lived along [the river] came to measure time not simply in years, but in [great] flood years — 1858, 1862, 1867, 1882, 1884, 1890, 1897, 1903, 1912, 1913, 1922.<sup>4</sup>

In 1879, Congress had created the Mississippi River Commission, which worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to build levees to hem in the Lower Mississippi River along its thousand mile course through six states.<sup>5</sup> In 1926, the Corps' Chief of Engineers reported that the collection of levees “is now in condition to prevent the destructive effects of floods.”<sup>6</sup>

From late August 1926 through the spring of 1927, unusually heavy precipitation fell upon the Mississippi River Valley. “From January 1 to April 30, 1927, enough rain fell in various sections of [the Mississippi River basin<sup>7</sup>] to cover the entire territory to a depth of 10.79 inches.”<sup>8</sup> By September of 1926, the heavy rain, in combination with other factors, such as deforestation due to logging in these

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<sup>4</sup> Pete Daniel, *Deep 'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> The Upper Mississippi River is over 900 miles long and flows from St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis, MN. to the mouth of the Ohio River in Cairo, IL. There begins the Lower Mississippi River. United States Geology Survey, “Mississippi River,” in *Status and Trends of the Nation's Biological Resources*, vol. 1 (Washington: GPO, 1998), pp. 352-356.

<sup>6</sup> United States Army Corps of Engineers, *Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers for 1926: Mississippi River Commission* (Washington: GPO, 1926), p. 1793, as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> The Mississippi River basin is the great expanse of territory — extending into 31 states and two provinces of Canada — that is drained by the Mississippi River and its tributaries (the rivers that flow into it), such as the Missouri, Ohio, Arkansas, White, and Red Rivers. United States Geology Survey, “Mississippi River,” pp. 351-384.

<sup>8</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927: Official Report of Flood Operations* (Washington: American National Red Cross, 1927), p. 4.

areas, caused the river to overflow its banks and levees in many places.<sup>9</sup> This flooding, though, was modest — localities and volunteers handled the clean up and necessary repairs and upgrades to levees. In the following month, as more precipitation made its way into the Upper Mississippi River, the volume of water moving downstream toward the Gulf of Mexico became immense. More rain storms and the spring melt off of snow added to the flow, which spilled over riverbanks in numerous states.

In April 1927, the Mississippi River began bursting levees.<sup>10</sup> The first was at Dorena, MO., where on April 16, 1,200 feet of levee crumbled.<sup>11</sup> Five days later, massive crevasses opened in levees in Mounds Landing, MS. and then Pendleton, AR.; hundreds of millions of gallons of water violently washed over the land. The flood had begun and its end was not declared until late July. People were drowned in the fields and in their homes. The rush of the water was so immense and violent that it permanently altered the topography in areas. Near the levee break at Mounds Landing, for example, the flood left a 65 acre lake that remains to this day.<sup>12</sup>

In all, levees in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Missouri broke in 145 places. Over 26,000 square miles of land in seven states inhabited by some 930,000 persons were flooded.<sup>13</sup> The damage was immense — 41,487 buildings were destroyed, 162,017 homes flooded, and over \$100 million [about \$1.12 billion in 2005 dollars<sup>14</sup>] in crops and farm animals destroyed.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear how many persons were killed — accounts vary widely — but, it seems clear that at least 246 died.<sup>16</sup> The total costs of the flood, though unclear, were huge.

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<sup>9</sup> Fewer trees meant fewer roots to absorb the rain, which made its way into the river. Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> For photographs and first-person accounts of the flood of 1927, see Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come*, chapters 2-5.

<sup>11</sup> John M. Berry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1998), p. 194. On the rains and river spillovers that preceded the levee breaks, see *Ibid.*, pp. 169-194.

<sup>12</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 279.

<sup>13</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Calculations of cost figures of 1927 in today's dollars was done through the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis' Consumer Price Index calculator, which may be found at [<http://www.minneapolisfed.org/Research/data/us/calc/index.cfm>]. Throughout the report, bracketed figures will refer to the present day equivalents of 1927 expenditures.

<sup>15</sup> The American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>16</sup> The estimate of 246 dead comes from the Red Cross. The American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927*, p. 6. Many factors account for the diverse estimates; among them is the lack of a firm count of the hundreds of men working on the levees. When crevasses erupted, walls of water poured forth, drowning men and sweeping their bodies dozens of miles away. John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1998), pp. 202, 202, 241, 285-286, and 330.

The Red Cross estimated direct economic losses at \$246,000,000 [\$2.75 billion in 2005]. The U.S. Weather bureau put direct losses at \$355,147,000 [\$3.97 billion]. Unofficial but authoritative estimates exceeded \$500,000,000 [\$5.59 billion]; with indirect losses, the number approached \$1,000,000,000 [\$11.18 billion], large enough in 1927 to affect the national economy.<sup>17</sup>

## **Federal Disaster Response, Relief, and Reconstruction**

The federal government's response to the disaster was a mixture of pre-New Deal minimalist federal governance and, to use recent parlance, "governing by network."<sup>18</sup> The federal government would make no immediate appropriations to the affected area.<sup>19</sup> Instead, it would utilize federal resources and coordinate networks of federal, state, private, and not-for-profit organizations to deliver relief services. The President's Cabinet would direct the relief effort in close consultation with the American National Red Cross [herein, "Red Cross"]. Thus, flood response policy was centralized, but, its execution was decentralized.<sup>20</sup>

In 1927, there was no federal disaster-response agency. Instead, the federal government had a partnership with the Red Cross, a congressionally-chartered quasi-governmental entity, established for a number of purposes, including the carrying out of "a system of national and international relief in time of peace, and to apply the same in mitigating the suffering caused by pestilence, famine, fire, floods, and other great national calamities, and to devise and carry out measures for preventing the same."<sup>21</sup> Under the charter, the President of the United States was to appoint six members, one of whom was to serve as chairman, of the eighteen-person central committee. The other five members were to be "named by him from the Departments of State, War, Navy, Treasury, and Justice."<sup>22</sup> While the law did not

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<sup>17</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 286.

<sup>18</sup> On governing by network today, see Stephen Goldsmith and William D. Eggers, *Governing by Network: The New Shape of the Public Sector* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Although the Army Corps of Engineers had committed its annual funds, in autumn 1927, President Coolidge ordered it to spend \$7 million [\$78.3 million]. In 1928, Congress appropriated funds to cover this shortfall (P.L. 70-7), to help reimburse localities for expenditures related to flood relief (P.L. 70-181), and to assist affected farmers (P.L. 70-393). Congress also passed the Jones-Reid Flood Control Act, which increased the federal role in river management and authorized \$325 million [\$3.7 billion] in appropriations.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927: A Case Study of the Political Thought of Herbert Hoover* (dissertation, Syracuse University, 1968), chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> P.L. 58-4 (1905); 36 U.S.C. 300102.

<sup>22</sup> P.L. 58-4. In 1947, the charter was amended to expand the board to have 50 members, termed "governors." (P.L. 80-47). The President of the United States was empowered to appoint eight of the governors, one of whom serves as its "principal officer." The other seven governors are to be "officials of departments and agencies of the United States (continued...)



provide a position for the President himself, Coolidge had been asked and agreed to serve as President of the Red Cross.

On April 22, 1927, President Calvin Coolidge issued a proclamation to the nation. He declared, “The Government is giving such aid as lies within its powers .... But the burden of caring for the homeless rests upon the agency designated by Government charter to provide relief in disaster — the American National Red Cross.”<sup>23</sup> He made no mention of emergency appropriations. Rather, Coolidge, as President of the United States and the Red Cross, asked for the public to donate \$5 million [\$55.9 million in 2005 dollars] to the Red Cross. Additionally, the President created a quasi governmental commission to assist the Red Cross in the relief effort. Coolidge appointed Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, as chairman.

Hoover was an apt choice — he had been elected to the Central Committee of the Red Cross by the incorporators and he had experience managing post-World War I relief and reconstruction efforts in Europe. Hoover was directly assisted by James L. Fieser, acting chairman of the Red Cross. The remainder of the commission, whose roles, according to President Coolidge, were to lend expert advice and expedite resource provision, included the secretaries of the Departments of the Treasury, War, and Navy, and the members of the Red Cross Central Committee.<sup>24</sup>

That same day — April 22 — the commission [herein, the “Hoover Flood Commission”] met for the first time and made three major decisions. First, it effectively turned over direction of the Red Cross’s relief effort to Secretary Hoover.<sup>25</sup> Second, it appointed Henry M. Baker, disaster relief director for the Red Cross, as the actual administrator of the response effort. As “dictator,” Baker would do the work to execute Hoover’s directions.<sup>26</sup> Third, the Flood Commission agreed that each of the affected states should appoint a “dictator;” this individual would serve as the point-person for the state, and who would see to it that state resources

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<sup>22</sup> (...continued)

Government, whose positions and interests qualify them to contribute to carrying out the programs and purposes of the corporation.” While the law no longer provides for the President to serve as President of the Red Cross, he is considered by the Red Cross the “honorary chairman.” See 36 U.S.C. 300104 and American Red Cross, *Our Report to the American People* (Washington, Red Cross, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Coolidge’s proclamation, interestingly, was issued on the stationery of the Red Cross. The text of the proclamation may be found in “Text of President Coolidge’s Appeal for Funds to Help Red Cross in Aiding Flood Refugees,” *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 1927, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Hoover, “Establishment of Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster Red Cross Committee — Statement,” April 22, 1927. As with Coolidge’s proclamation, Hoover’s press release was released on Red Cross stationery.

<sup>25</sup> This was done when the members of the Central Committee of the Red Cross, who were part of the Hoover Committee, directed Fieser to use his power of director of the Red Cross’s flood response to use his powers at Hoover’s direction. Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> “President Sends Hoover to Expand Red Cross Relief,” *New York Times*, Apr. 24, 1927, p. 9.

were provided to the centrally directed response.<sup>27</sup> These decisions made Hoover, to use recent nomenclature, the “czar” for federal disaster response, likely the first.<sup>28</sup>

This concentration of a wide array of governmental powers in a single set of hands enabled the federal government to respond rapidly without bureaucratic impediments. If Hoover asked for a federal resource, the Hoover Flood Commission would see that it was provided.<sup>29</sup> The Memphis<sup>30</sup> flood response headquarters served as an “administrative pump.” A hodgepodge of resources from the many partners in the relief effort flowed in, as did advice from the Hoover Flood Commission and local relief workers. The headquarters, which was divided into operational units, including purchase and supply, river transportation and rescue work, rail transportation, and so forth, served as a processor. Baker sat at the heart of the federal government and Red Cross partnership.

Representatives from every federal agency [involved], from the Army to the Public Health Service, and several governors soon sat near Baker’s desk. When Baker needed something, he called to the appropriate man, who took care of it. Thirty yards away a Red Cross purchasing agent conducted a nearly continuous reverse auction; he stood on a platform and shouted out supplies and quantities needed, and dozens of suppliers shouted back bids.<sup>31</sup>

Out of the pump flowed streams of coordinated responses. A single, official channel of communication — “Field Operations Letters” — was established; through it, the headquarters delivered relief plan directions to local personnel and groups by telephone calls and radio communications directed to regional Red Cross offices.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, coordinating the federal response with the Red Cross gave the relief effort the power to draw upon thousands of already-trained Red Cross volunteers in affected areas. These volunteers on the scene provided information to the Hoover’s headquarters for use in planning and coordinating the response, and utilized relationships they had with affected residents and governments to help execute the response. Federal, state, and quasi-governmental entities and private citizens and businesses were linked to form an “administrative machine.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 275.

<sup>28</sup> A review has failed to locate any earlier instances of a single federal administrator being empowered to utilize the powers of multiple departments in response to a natural disaster.

<sup>29</sup> Hoover, Fieser, and General Edgar Jadwin of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers left the evening of April 22 on a train to Memphis, TN, where they would set up the first command center. Hoover would visit flooded areas and direct relief efforts for 60 of the next 71 days. Barry, *Rising Tide*, pp. 262, 273.

<sup>30</sup> The first headquarters was set up in Memphis. The headquarters was moved to New Orleans on May 26 to better contend with the damage caused by the southerly flow of water. Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 274.

<sup>32</sup> Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Lohof, Herbert Hoover, “Spokesman of Humane Efficiency: The Mississippi Flood (continued...)”

The President, for his part, let the Hoover Flood Commission run relief administration. He issued a further plea for another \$5 million in donations to the Red Cross on May 2.<sup>34</sup> Hoover, though, directed the expenditure of the funds,<sup>35</sup> often shipping allotments to local Red Cross chapters to expend according to their directions.

The scale of the relief effort was massive. Approximately 640,000 displaced persons<sup>36</sup> were aided by the Red Cross; 307,208 stayed in over 150 Red Cross camps, many for up to four months; the remainder of evacuees stayed elsewhere, but, received food from the Red Cross. The Red Cross provided those in the camps with food, tobacco, medical care, clothing, and some entertainment. Evacuees, typically, lived in tents donated by the Department of War, and had access to simple bathing and toilet facilities. They received rudimentary medical care; some entertainment and courses in home economics were provided.

While the relief operations were of considerable breadth, federal recovery and reconstruction efforts were quite modest.<sup>37</sup> The Army Corp of Engineers, after some delay, repaired the levees. Hoover encouraged affected states to incorporate state reconstruction corporations. He also strongly encouraged banks in affected areas and the captains of industries of the day to provide working capital for the banks by buying stock in them. His plan was for state reconstruction corporations to lend money to farmers, sell these loans to the Federal Intermediate Credit Corporation, and use the proceeds to make more loans.<sup>38</sup> The Red Cross, meanwhile, helped citizens rebuild some of their homes, and provided them with seeds, farm implements, basic household furnishings, and other items to help them regain the ability to sustain themselves.

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<sup>33</sup> (...continued)

of 1927,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 3, autumn 1970, p. 692. For a more extended treatment of flood administration, see Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, chapter 5, “The Hoover Machine.”

<sup>34</sup> The text of Coolidge’s request may be found in “Text of the President’s Flood Relief Appeal,” *New York Times*, May 3, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> “Hoover Grants Melville, Which Asked Nothing, \$150,000,” *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 1927, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> While the Red Cross’s report refers to persons driven from their homes as “refugees,” this report prefers the terms “displaced persons” and “evacuees” and leaves “refugees” to be used to refer to individuals who have fled their home nations.

<sup>37</sup> As President Coolidge later told Congress, “The Government is not the insurer of its citizens against the hazards of the elements. We shall always have flood and drought, heat and cold, earthquake and wind, lightning and tidal wave, which are all too constant in their afflictions. The Government does not undertake to reimburse citizens for loss and damage incurred under such circumstances. It is chargeable, however, with the rebuilding of public works and the humanitarian duty of relieving its citizens of distress.” President Calvin Coolidge, “President’s Annual Message,” as reprinted in 69 *Congressional Record* 107 (1927).

<sup>38</sup> These lending entities had \$13 million [\$145.4 million] to lend. Barry, *Rising Tide*, pp. 366-369.

By mid-July, waters had receded some and the Hoover Flood Commission began shutting down the Red Cross camps. The headquarters of the flood response was moved to Washington, DC, where it was disbanded by early autumn.<sup>39</sup> However, Hoover continued to work with the Red Cross to provide aid for affected areas through the end of the year.<sup>40</sup>

## An Assessment of the Executive Branch's Response

The public donated and the Red Cross delivered over \$21 million [\$234.9 million] in aid. The federal government provided, perhaps, \$10 million [\$111.8 million] in resources and manpower — nearly \$32 million [\$346.7 million] in all.<sup>41</sup>

On the whole, the response and relief provided by the federal government and Red Cross appear to have been well executed. The concentration of great power in the person of Secretary Hoover enabled quick and creative responses. By April 23, 1927, U.S. Coast Guard boats were rescuing citizens trapped in trees and on rooftops, bridges, and high grounds, the U.S. Army had shipped thousands of tents, cots, and blankets to areas where Red Cross camps were being set up, and the Navy had received Hoover's request to dispatch boats and rescue crews.<sup>42</sup> In an age when telephones were few and personal wireless telephones nonexistent, Hoover, just 11 days after the flood committee had first met, reported to President Coolidge that the relief effort that “we have coordinated under the Red Cross ... the personnel, equipment, and supplies of the federal departments.” He further informed the President that the Red Cross headquarters had “coordinated ... with the local citizens' [flood] committees, Red Cross chapters, State officials, Departments of Health, National Guard, [and the] American Legion and others...”<sup>43</sup>

The blending of governmental and private resources enabled creative responses. For example, the Red Cross Rescue Fleet was cobbled together from privately-owned yachts, commercial barges, boats belonging to federal agencies such as the U.S. Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and river steamships.<sup>44</sup> Railroads were employed to move both materials, manpower, and evacuees.<sup>45</sup> Hoover also brought into the mix the

<sup>39</sup> Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, pp. 101.

<sup>40</sup> “\$1,000,000 to Flood Victims,” *New York Times*, Dec. 21, 1927, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170-173.

<sup>42</sup> “Cabinet Members Ask for \$5,000,000 for Flood Relief,” *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 1927, p. 3; and *Memorandum to the Secretary of the Navy from Herbert Hoover*, Apr. 23, 1927, provided to author by the Herbert Hoover Library of West Branch, Iowa.

<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>44</sup> American Red Cross, *Our Report to the American People*, p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., “Hoover convinced railroads — the Illinois Central, the Missouri Pacific, the Texas Pacific, the Southern, the Frisco — to provide free transportation for refugees and cut rates (continued...) ”

Rockefeller Foundation, which provided public health assistance to affected counties.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, President Coolidge’s employment of a Cabinet-based commission helped clarify to the public and local, state, and federal officials who was in charge of the flood response. Secretary Hoover was widely known throughout the nation, and the President made sure that everyone got the message that Hoover was in charge by utilizing the bully pulpit — he issued a presidential proclamation to the press. That same day — April 23 — Hoover and Fieser made contact with governors to let them know that the federal government and Red Cross would jointly direct all activities. The scholarly and press accounts on the flood response cited above reveal no jurisdictional disputes between federal agencies or between federal and state agencies. Again, Hoover created an “administrative machine.”

That said, the federal response has been faulted on at least four points. First, while the employment of governmental and private sector resources allowed for creative responses, it also opened the door to potential abuses. For example, Hoover, reportedly, empowered Baker to order the seizure of privately owned boats by relief workers.<sup>47</sup> Thus, with no executive order or statute, private individuals were authorized to take the property of others. To whom individuals affected and aggrieved by civilian exercise of federal powers would protest or appeal is simply unclear.<sup>48</sup>

Second, decentralized execution meant that the federal government had little oversight of the actual operations of the relief camps. Two significant incidents illustrate the limitations of this method of administration. First, critics accused the Red Cross of being slow to respond to the spread of venereal diseases among camp residents.<sup>49</sup> Second, in some Red Cross camps, local officials brutalized Black evacuees and disallowed them to leave the camps.<sup>50</sup> In each of these instances, the

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<sup>45</sup> (...continued)

on freight during the emergency.” Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 275.

<sup>46</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 331.

<sup>47</sup> “President Sends Hoover to Expand Red Cross Relief,” p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> For an introduction to the complex legal nature of the Red Cross, see Wesley A. Sturges, “The Legal Status of the Red Cross,” *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 56, no. 1, Nov. 1957, pp. 1-32.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel, *Deep’n As It Come*, pp. 87, 118-119.

<sup>50</sup> Under the sharecropper relationship, a farmer would work land owned by another person and turn over to the landowner the products thereof. The landowner would sell the agricultural products and give the farmer a “share” of the proceeds. Under such an arrangement, many Blacks in the South had fallen into near or outright peonage. Farmers fell into debt when landowners would charged them for various items and services — such as loans for seed — and provided small returns. Bound by debt, farmers could not leave the land. After the flood of 1927, landowners had a strong interest in seeing that their sharecroppers returned to their fields. Therefore, they often employed threats of violence and called upon state and local governments to help them force farmers to return to work. Robyn Spencer, “Contested Terrain: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor,” *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 79, no. 2, spring 1994, pp. 170-181; and Barry, *Rising Tide*, pp. 303-335.

federal government had no one at these sites to provide accurate reports on the conditions or put a halt to these actions.<sup>51</sup>

Third, directions from headquarters and Hoover to field operations were very explicit as to the goals desired. In one instance, Hoover wired a regional representative in New Iberia, LA, on May 1. He ordered it to erect a camp to hold 10,000 persons and gave instructions on the proper construction and installation of the facilities, including tent platforms, latrines, pipelines, wells, and power lines.<sup>52</sup> However, these same directions provided little direction as to the appropriate means. Locals were to figure it out themselves. Free to use whatever means they felt necessary to achieve these ends, local relief workers, in many instances, forced Black males, sometimes at gun point, to participate in flood response work.<sup>53</sup> In short, workers carrying out ostensibly federal work were not federal workers, and did not have to follow federal administrative laws.

Finally, there is the matter of power concentration in the hands of a Cabinet-level czar. As head of the Hoover Flood Commission, head of the Red Cross flood relief effort, and the public face of flood relief — thanks to his tireless public relations efforts — Secretary Hoover held an immense amount of administrative and political power.<sup>54</sup> And, he was permitted to wield this power for over three months — April through July of 1927 — for the President had given the Hoover Flood Commission the authority to direct disaster response, relief, and reconstruction. While this empowered him to do much good work, Hoover also made glaring mistakes, and made matters worse by refusing to admit his errors and make amends. Critically, nobody, the President excepted, could force Hoover to change course.<sup>55</sup> For example,

- There is evidence that Hoover was aware of the mistreatment of Blacks in the camps and the shortcomings of his credit provision plan. Yet, he did little to fix these problems.<sup>56</sup>
- In late May of 1927, the Secretary decided that the farmers of the area should plant soybeans, instead of cotton. He directed the Red Cross, which received public donations for the flood response, to buy enough soybean seed for 400,000 acres. When informed by agricultural scientists that soybeans were not an advisable crop choice for the affected areas, Hoover disregarded this counsel and

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<sup>51</sup> More problematic is that President Coolidge empowered Hoover to issue reports on the progress of flood recovery. With an eye on a run for the presidency in 1928, this gave Hoover a strong incentive to be less than objective about inadequate results. Thus, he would often claim that six or fewer persons died once he was put in control of flood response. This figure is not deemed credible. See Barry, *Rising Tide*, p. 289.

<sup>52</sup> Lohof, *Hoover and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365-395.

<sup>54</sup> Hoover's leadership of the response to the flood helped vault him from a non-contender into the presidency.

<sup>55</sup> The 69<sup>th</sup> Congress adjourned March 4, 1927 and the 70<sup>th</sup> Congress began December 5, 1929. The President refused to call Congress back for a special session during the interim.

<sup>56</sup> Farmers lacked assets — which were destroyed or washed away by the flood — to pledge as collateral inhibited their ability to access the credit. Barry, *Rising Tide*, pp. 365-395.

contacted banks to urge them to loan monies to farmers for soybean crops.<sup>57</sup>

- A destitute victim departing a relief camp might receive no more than “tickets that entitled him to railway fare [back to his home city], and to a tent if his house was gone, tickets that gave him lumber, seeds, implements [for gardening], and a mule or cow.”<sup>58</sup> Many newspapers ran sharp editorials that faulted the federal government’s rehabilitation efforts. They argued that the federal government, which was running a massive surplus, should provide direct aid to flood victims in order to help them regain self-sustenance. Hoover disagreed — he thought flood victims had received enough to get back on their feet.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, even these modest resources did not reach those in need. Red Cross officials distributed some evacuees’ allotments to the planters for whom they worked. Some planters charged evacuees for the goods.<sup>60</sup>

In summation, President Coolidge’s version of a disaster response and recovery czar enabled quick and apparently efficient utilization of governmental and private sector resources and personnel. It also, though, gave a single administrator a large quantity of power with only presidential oversight, and, in some instances, that power appears to have been used inadvisably

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>58</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1952), vol. 2, p. 130.

<sup>59</sup> Many displaced persons disagreed. “Victims of Flood Still Plead for Aid,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1927, p. E1.

<sup>60</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, 370-374.