Structural change, not total annihilation, is needed at FEMA. Eliminating FEMA, as has been discussed in the media, would unnecessarily add more confusion to the nation’s emergency management system. On top of the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), this strategy would be ill-advised at this time.

What has worked for FEMA in the past is realignment from within. Such was the case when FEMA’s core legislative mandate, the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, was enacted in 1988. The concept for the Stafford Act was originally developed by a relatively unknown congressman from Erie, Pennsylvania, who was upset with FEMA for not properly serving his constituents after a local disaster. At the time, little chance of success was ascribed to that congressman in his quest to reinvent FEMA. Contributions to this bill came from many areas; good staff work, support of his fellow members of Congress, and comments from state partners including two Californians, Charlie Wynne and Paul Jacks. While in the Senate the bill was tombstoned with the name of the Senator from Vermont, Robert T. Stafford.

The congressman, who was ill-served by FEMA, wrote the most pivotal legislation in emergency management history, surrendered his bill to history, and later became Governor of Pennsylvania and the first secretary of DHS. As a congressman, Tom Ridge sought to change FEMA from the inside out. The Robert T. Stafford Act, formerly known as the Ridge Bill, resulted in major changes in the way FEMA conducted business. The bill provided standards for disaster program decisions that did not exist prior. This legislation had a profound improvement on the orderly delivery of disaster relief and recovery services throughout the emergency management system.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, a new era in emergency management has emerged. The complexity of the new era requires an improved approach to emergency management. The time has come to rekindle the spirit of the Ridge Bill to remake FEMA into a robust customer service organization serving their state counterparts. As demonstrated by the Ridge Bill earlier, it is possible for FEMA to change toward the better. Positive change requires courageous leadership and a dedication to fact-based, continuous improvement management. Like a house that is worthy of remodeling, FEMA has a good foundation. It has a sound structure and knowledgeable staff that can be built upon. Starting from scratch does not always guarantee success. The DHS experience itself is a testament to this point. FEMA should be saved from the scrapheap of history and improved. Improvements could include the FEMA director reporting directly to the President and giving states the primary responsibility and support to fully administer recovery and mitigation programs, just to name a few.

Since customer service has been a chronic problem at FEMA, Congress should rethink the role of DHS in emergency management and revive FEMA with a sense of pride, purpose, and process to serve America through the Republic for which it stands.

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FEMA: Change or die
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