

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Hurricane Harvey's Devastation Is An Opportunity For Houston

Some wag once said it's a shame to let a good crisis go unexploited - or something like that. I'm paraphrasing.

Hurricane Harvey is a devastating natural disaster which was going to cause damage no matter how well Texans prepared for it. But it was made worse by the previous decisions of the people in charge of Houston. I'm talking about the lack of zoning laws for building and development in Houston. Anyone can build anything, anywhere. Unlike other city governments who plan for the orderly development of their respective city, Houston has no green spaces, no allowance for rain runoff and no restrictions on building on flood plains. Although Harvey would have devastated Houston regardless of whether there were restrictions on building on the flood plain, the failure to limit construction on the flood plain made things worse.

I think Congress should help Houston recover by providing necessary funding but Congress should also require Houston to reform its policies. There should be no rebuilding on the flood plain and anyone who rebuilt their property after a previous flood damaged it should not be eligible for any compensation. They already knew their property would be flooded and chose to rebuild anyway. We should not subsidize foolish people for making foolish decisions.

I had to laugh at Joel Osteen, the minister of a mega-church in Houston who refused to open his doors to flood refugees. After being publicly shamed, he changed his mind and tried to justify his actions on television. Everyone (except maybe his congregation) could easily see through his fatuous excuses. He is what I call a hypo-Christian - a hypocrite who passes himself off as a Christian. His followers no doubt have the same mind-set and ideology he has. They are middle and upper class people leading comfortable lives mouthing all the platitudes from the New Testament about loving one's neighbor, but limit the definition of "neighbor" to the affluent family next door.

Heaven forbid that they help a homeless person or a drug addict - someone who really needs a caring Christian's help. To them, being poor is just as big a sin as blasphemy, adultery or murder: something committed by other people, not someone they would have anything to do with or allow into their church in time of need.

It is said the those who do not learn history are bound to repeat the mistakes of the past. The devastation of Harvey is a prime example of that adage. Had Texas citizens heeded the lessons of the last hurricane, they would not now be facing the huge crisis they are in now.

But I will say one thing for Texas. Considering there are 6 million people living in the Houston Metropolitan Area (more than the entire state of Wisconsin), there were very few deaths (less than 50 at last count) and relatively few destroyed homes (less than 50,000). Had the flood occurred in Bangladesh or a similar area, the death toll would be in the thousands or tens of thousands.

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