



**Timothy W. Kneeland.** *Playing Politics with Natural Disaster: Hurricane Agnes, the 1972 Election, and the Origins of FEMA.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. xvi + 227 pp. \$36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-4853-0.

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On June 24, 1972, President Richard Nixon went to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to meet with victims of Hurricane Agnes. Then the most powerful hurricane recorded in the United States, Agnes inundated the Twin Tiers region of New York and Pennsylvania with thirty-two trillion gallons of water, flooding entire towns throughout the Susquehanna River watershed. The president had planned to spend the day at Camp David making picks for that summer's All-Star baseball game but reluctantly agreed to go Pennsylvania instead. During his two-hour visit, Nixon consoled residents and business owners, pledging to help "to the extent we can" (p. 61). This anecdote reveals much about political strategizing during a natural disaster, specifically in a year Nixon faced reelection and more crucially in a state he failed to carry in 1968.

Nixon often looked to gain voter traction with public appearances, from NFL Hall of Fame induction ceremonies to his predawn Lincoln Memorial visit in 1970 to talk with antiwar activists; as Nicholas Evan Sarantakes notes of the former, "as [was] almost always the case with Nixon, there was a political element" to his attendance.[1] But as its subtitle indicates, Timothy W. Kneeland's study is about much more than the thirty-seventh president. He weaves Nixon into a larger story

about partisanship, electoral politics, bureaucratic logjams, deindustrialization and rebirth, and even US involvement in southeast Asia. Lording over it all is a brutal tempest, which began innocuously over the Yucatán Peninsula, only to wreak its greatest havoc in areas unaccustomed to hurricanes. And for readers whose thirst for Nixon's epic downfall is hard to slake, lurking as a ghostly undertow is the Watergate scandal, whose seminal break-in occurred less than a week before Agnes made landfall.

Histories of specific hurricanes tend to focus on the most destructive.[2] Yet considering the scope of Agnes's carnage, few works have appeared since Anthony J. Mussari's *Appointment with Disaster: The Swelling of the Flood* (1974). On the storm's forty-fifth anniversary in 2017, he noted it was "a story of genuine heroism at the ground level," telling the Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, *Times-Leader*, "of equal significance was the response of individuals who wanted to help themselves and others." [3] Kneeland pays homage to the late Mussari's sentiment, offering a well-researched history "from the top down and the bottom up" (p. xi). His geographic lens centers on Elmira and Corning, New York, Wilkes-Barre, and Harrisburg, all of which suffered intense flood damage and property loss. The cities he finds,

already on the path to corporate disinvestment and closing factories, saw those ills compounded by the storm. He then assesses how figures from the White House to Congress and from state houses to the citizenry were affected by and responded to the storm's aftermath and the welfare of its victims. In his closing chapters, Kneeland charts the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), providing a segue into his newly published *Declaring Disaster: Buffalo's Blizzard of '77 and the Creation of FEMA* (2021), which examines the massive blizzard that struck Buffalo in 1977.

Kneeland sets his stage with an overview of US disaster management. From the early republic to the mid-twentieth century, federal relief funding came in piecemeal fashion at best with Congress (and many presidents) often hesitant to liberally dole out assistance. As Grover Cleveland remarked on the issue in 1887, "people should support the government; the government should not support the people" (p. 13). But in the wake of the New Deal, passage of the Disaster Relief Act (1950) gave the federal government a permanent role in disaster management. The measure allowed presidents to declare states of emergency and oversee relief efforts, though responsibility for allocating funds fell to Congress. From 1950 to the early 1970s, the two branches debated crises, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and oil spills, with Republicans and Democrats usually split on how much relief funding to allocate and to whom.

After Agnes, municipal officials were ill-prepared to cope with damage and property loss, forcing them to seek state and federal assistance. Kneeland observes that disaster declarations "are more frequent in swing states during election years," and he is particularly sharp in highlighting how timing and partisanship shaped divergent responses to the storm (p. 60). Governors Milton Shapp (D-PA) and Nelson Rockefeller (R-NY) best illustrated the divide. Shapp, after being rescued by rowboat, tried persuading the president into

action. Nixon initially would not take his phone calls, labeling his aid requests "too excitable" (p. 61). With higher aspirations of his own, Shapp toured the hardest hit areas of his state, asking how the Nixon administration spent untold sums on the Vietnam War while not helping its own people quickly enough. The less sympathetic Rockefeller, who shared Nixon's fiscally conservative credo of "New Federalism," refused a special legislative session for flood relief in New York and vetoed related reform proposals. With reelection a priority, Nixon ultimately issued declarations for seven states and enlisted cabinet members and other officials to initiate the relief process. Multiple government agencies encumbered the dispersal, leaving some victims without their promised assistance for months or, in some cases, years. But electorally, Nixon's bet paid off as he took New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland in his 1972 landslide win.

Beyond the politics, Kneeland positions Agnes as a catalyst for urban renewal, improvements in flood control infrastructure, and governments' subsequent coordinated disaster relief. The cities of the Twin Tiers sought to reinvent themselves in a postindustrial age with varying degrees of success while fortifying their waterfronts with levees, dikes, and flood walls. The passage of the Disaster Relief Act (1974) was the first major step in addressing the backlog of getting relief to those who needed it most. Kneeland terms the act's significance "debatable," though it laid the foundations of what became FEMA, signed into law by the Carter administration (p. 141). Intended to dislodge funding allocation and efficiently aid relief efforts, inconsistencies remained, notably in FEMA's actions after Hurricane Katrina (2005) and Superstorm Sandy (2012). Overall, the author finds disaster management in the US imperfect, the result of a complex interplay of politics, geography, and economics.

For those interested in what one might term "disaster history," *Playing Politics with Disaster* is

a most-welcome volume. Kneeland's prose is sharp, to be sure, and his research quite impressive. The historical context is richly detailed, with comic and tragic anecdotes throughout. Perhaps its greatest strength is its depth at the local level, as Kneeland introduces many actors from the known to the obscure. Scholarly readers and environmental historians will certainly find much useful here, especially the author's rendering of the political atmosphere in the 1970s and grasp of disaster management's intricacies. But the task is immense, with an exhaustive cast of characters and an infinite list of governmental agencies in play. And while intended for a general audience, lay readers might for that reason find the book challenging.

#### Notes

[1]. Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Fan in Chief: Richard Nixon and American Sports, 1969-1974* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 135.

[2]. Ernest Zebrowski and Judith A. Howard, *Category 5: The Story of Camille; Lessons Unlearned from America's Most Violent Hurricane* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006); and David K. Twigg, *The Politics of Disaster: Tracking the Impact of Hurricane Andrew* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

[3]. "45 Years Later, Agnes Still on People's Minds," *Times-Leader*, June 18, 2017.

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