



A Houston Case Study

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Renewing the American Neighborhood:

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Observing the Americans, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy In America*,

Americans of all ages, conditions, and all dispositions constantly unite together. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations to which all belong but also a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very specialized, large and small. Americans group together to hold fetes, found seminaries, build inns, construct churches, distribute books, dispatch missionaries to the antipodes. They establish hospitals, prisons, schools by the same method.¹

Stories abound about survival and recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. No one will ever compile all the stories in one place. But the one word that is continually appearing is "neighbor" or its plural "neighbors." This is the root of the neighborhood.

Having an atmosphere that fosters the needed communal ties that lend themselves to building a neighborhood is vitally important. Leo Linbeck III, noted Houston businessman, civic leader and philanthropist, wrote a post for NewGeography.com as the recovery was underway. Linbeck noted about the Houston atmosphere,

"People come to this city to build a better life for themselves, to start and raise a family, and to do so with the support and encouragement of neighbors. This culture of opportunity means that Houstonians welcome newcomers, in a way that older or more status-conscious cities do not. Houston may not be a nice place to visit during the summer, but it is a great place to create a life all year round."²

Linbeck later completed the picture,

"This culture really shines through during events like Hurricane Harvey. Despite what the narrative spinners would have you believe, we are not rugged individualists; we are rugged communitarians. We know that when times are tough, you must rely first on family, then friends, then neighbors, and then – and only if you're one of the few, unfortunate folks who cannot rely on any of those three – on the government. And if we have family, friends, or neighbors who can help, reaching out for government support is actually taking resources away from those who need them more.

In short, the best governance to rely upon is self- governance."³

This is consistent with what Ed Hubbard wrote,

What I have been advocating is what I understood to be an approach to government based on those principles drawn from the history of our experiences, of which de Tocqueville wrote and Reagan championed: an approach to re-building our society for the 21st

Century based on its original purposes and principles—a society built on the foundational relationships formed in families, neighborhoods, congregations, private organizations; facilitated through the activities of free markets and free trade; and then preserved and protected by local, state and federal governments, each acting within their own sphere of competence and responsibility. It is our adherence over the centuries to these original purposes and principles, which has made us “exceptional”.⁴

More recently, when reviewing a new book by Patrick J. Deneen entitled *Why Liberalism Failed*, Tod Lindberg, a Fellow with the Hudson Institute, describes Deneen’s criticism of our current view of “liberty,” and his recommended action for recovering a true societal sense of “liberty,” which echoes Linbeck and Hubbard:

In short, the older view of liberty included a vision of how to live a good life that modern liberalism has decided human beings can do without. Mr. Deneen thinks that this shift has been a disaster, both for the human beings forced to hew to liberalism’s rudderless individualist ethos and for civilization. ...

He [Deneen] argues instead for a practical effort to recultivate, within liberal society, the local sense of community and culture, household and family, that once shaped human fulfillment and that liberalism has disrupted. That sounds like a desirable choice for many people, but it is indeed a choice: a voluntary arrangement—in short, a liberal arrangement.⁵

In a Fox News feature by Janice Dean on a notable organization named Team Rubicon and their volunteer work in Wharton, Texas, Dean interviewed a woman named Nicole Morales who made as substantive a statement on the meaning of *Renewing the American Neighborhood* as any when she said,

"It's about knowing who your neighbors are well before a disaster so that when disaster strikes you know who in your community may need your help the most. Maybe they're disabled, maybe they've got limited mobility, maybe they just need a helping hand to get back on track."⁶

This is important to note. The precepts at the root of *Renewing the American Neighborhood* are not exclusively about disaster recovery. In the days of political campaigning, especially before computers, local organizers would canvass a neighborhood. These organizers knew when neighbors moved out, and scratched them off their voter lists. The organizers also knew when neighbors moved in, and promptly registered them to vote, assuming of course they were of the same mindset. This type of community knowledge is less common now in most places. Some will say this disappeared with the proliferation of television and air conditioning, when people left the front porch and opted for the living room.

This is what civil society is all about. This is how it functions. It is what Alexis de Tocqueville saw that awed him enough to write about it.

Writing previously about our nation’s Founders, Ed Hubbard noted,

To them, citizenship in a free society required active involvement in the life of the community and all its organizations; it was not a license to receive tax-paid benefits, nor a right to delegate community involvement to tax-paid bureaucrats. Democracy is what transpired in town hall meetings and town councils called or elected by the people to govern communities, in service organizations and church congregations, and in schools; while the work of elected representatives in state and national capitols was limited to a few specific tasks outlined in republican constitutions.⁷

Aid from the federal government is being and will be provided. But it does take a situation like this to realize that the federal government is too bulky to respond well. The things, the intangibles that make the business world work, cannot be applied to government action.

The local governments on the ground opened Houston's enormous George R. Brown Convention Center as a shelter. And people responded, both volunteers and the people in need of shelter. Eventually these governments opened another shelter at the NRG complex. Churches started talking people in, schools started being turned into shelters. This was all before the federal government could do anything worthwhile.

Ed Hubbard addressed the conditions necessary for this kind of response a few years ago when he observed,

Instead, we need to focus, for now, on the rest of us—"Main Street Americans". We need to begin to promote civic engagement among Main Street Americans who still live, work and raise our families in local communities, and spread that engagement to neighborhoods whose residents have become dependent on government. We need to focus the way we reduce government and re-align responsibilities among the different levels of governments, and between government and individuals, based on Main Street America's re-engagement in the lives of our communities; including, for instance, how we re-build our infrastructure to provide for as much time as possible for individuals to care for their families and volunteer in their neighborhoods, churches, civic organizations, schools and local governments.⁸

This is localism. This is what it means to make the local government, the local community, the local neighborhood, the empowered ones to start taking action. When this mindset is fostered and encouraged, when it is the norm, every one and any one can become a leader as the situation unfolds.

Terry Clayton, a resident in a community named Sienna Plantation, was featured in an article for *Katy Christian Magazine*. In describing her remarkable efforts during Harvey, Clayton said, "I didn't realize I was being a leader. I didn't know people were looking to me for answers."⁹

Gary Gillen, writing at *Katy Christian Magazine* described the scene when he got into the Riverstone area and noticed the utter devastation, "An attitude of hopefulness mixed with exhaustion and appreciation. I saw White, South Asian, Hispanic, and Black. I do not know the

religious beliefs of any of them. It didn't matter today. Mostly, I saw people. People whose homes were unlivable. People who wanted to help friends." ¹⁰



*An apt image appearing in the Wall Street Journal symbolizing the Texas and American spirit during Hurricane Harvey aftermath.*¹¹

The Cajun Navy deserves mention here as well. This is a group of guys, most all of them with boats, who mount up and head out from Louisiana to do what they can. No one ever knows how many will show up, it is a volunteer “navy” after all, but they will show up. They do not get paid, they usually get fed, and they got fed in Houston, a small price to pay for the services they provided and the lives they rescued.

And not all of this activity is driven solely by individuals. Businesses small and large played a part in rescue and recovery as well.

An amazing facility named Christ Clinic in Katy, Texas, once they were able to reopen after the water receded, got to work treating the community, "Over the next 7 days the clinic provided free medical services to over 700 patients ranging from patient visits to prescription refills. The clinic also provided 186 free tetanus shots to community members, volunteers and first responders."¹²

Major grocery chains in the region were ready to provide aid immediately. H-E-B and Kroger both have magnificent mobile facilities and these were utilized in the immediate recovery. H-E-B was along the Gulf Coast providing hot meals and bottled water to anyone, no questions asked. Kroger got one of their mobile pharmacies inside the George R. Brown Convention Center and started doing what pharmacies do. It is easy to forget that as flood waters rose and people hurriedly sought higher ground, that many medications were left behind, or even if they were taken, they could have been lost or ruined in the chaos afterward. Providing for these people was a necessity. Only a business can respond quickly enough.



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The story of business involvement needs to be told and shared because it is indeed such a crucial ingredient to *Renewing the American Neighborhood*. In a disaster situation, businesses, governments, churches and schools can all respond quicker than the federal authorities.

Hurricane Harvey relief efforts in southwest Houston were supported by the upstart community organization Southwest Houston Alliance (SWHA), a group formed by several community leaders in 2016. They worked to collect needed supplies like food, water, diapers, sheets, and towels for flood victims, donating them to the Gulfton area Childrens Activity Center, and the Chabad on Fondren.

SWHA Co-founder Pablo Szub, a civic leader from the Gulfton area, made the call for supplies and arranged collection and drop off details. “We knew we had to jump in and help our neighbors as soon as we could, that major relief from NGOs and government agencies would take time”, said Szub. “The community responded and immediately provided needed water, food, and diapers”.¹⁵

Jim Bigham, the former Sharpstown Civic President who along with Szub started the SWHA, was grateful to the neighbors who pitched in. “Although the volume of supplies we collected and donated seems small, we were able to move quickly, providing help early, while comprehensive efforts were being developed,” Bigham remarked. “I couldn’t be more proud of our neighbors who stepped in to help.”¹⁶



*Volunteers of all ages took up the challenge to assist SWHA to collect needed supplies*¹⁷

Story after story reveals that no one needed clearance from anyone to get started in the work that was ahead.

Joel Kotkin and Wendell Cox, in a piece for RealClearPolitics.com

“Social networks and cohesion are an important part of recovery and survival,” professor Aldrich suggests. “Houston should be investing in bringing neighborhoods together.”¹⁸

Joel Kotkin wrote at Forbes.com in partially comparing the Houston response to Harvey to the New Orleans response to Katrina,

More recently, Katrina revealed how a collapsed civic culture can make a disaster worse. Corrupt politicians, an ineffective business community and poor emergency services turned a Harvey-like natural disaster into a massive human one, with much greater loss of life. Some blame the city's entrenched, often multi-generational lower-income population but perhaps more critical to failure was the city's often elegantly appointed and comfortable upper echelon.

In the decades before Katrina, as southern cities like Houston and Atlanta were burgeoning, New Orleans stagnated. Joel Garreau in his *Nine Nations of North America* described the Crescent City as a "marvelous collection of sleaziness and peeling paint." The aristocracy enjoyed the city's unparalleled culture while many ambitious people from its neighborhoods migrated elsewhere. Without a strong, engaged business community and middle class, there was little attempt to fix the infrastructure. This weak civic culture has left a city with huge economic challenges that a regenerated local business community is now gamely trying to address.¹⁹

This "weak civic culture" meant that organizers were few. These modern day organizers are people that Robert Woodson has termed "neighborhood healers" and who he has subsequently identified as "antibodies" in the community. People who are closest to the problem, closest to the issue, who know how to block out the problem to reach a solution.

In a video testimonial for PovertyCure, Woodson relates a story of how a certain black community in New Jersey was notorious for robbing anyone trying to deliver pizzas into the community. Eventually the pizza companies stopped delivering to the community. Some eighteen and twenty year old males from this community found a business venture, and became "antibodies" at the same time. These young men would deliver the pizzas into the neighborhood because the community knew these young men, they were part of the community, so the pizzas got delivered. The pizza parlors gained more customers, some young men earned some money delivering pizza, and crime decreased.²⁰

No, this is not rescue and recovery after a natural disaster, but again, it is localism. No government, local or federal, was likely to find a way to make pizza delivery a reality. Instead the answer came from within the community, the answer came from the people who were partially being affected.

Joel Kotkin later added,

Local volunteers pitched in, so much so, notes Houston-based analyst Tory Gattis, that many found themselves unable to participate because each Facebook call for help spurred more volunteers than could be accommodated. Houston can also count on something New Orleans lacked: a strong, and philanthropically inclined business establishment who are pouring millions into recovery efforts.

Houston will come back, albeit with some modifications, not because it's a charity case, but because its people want to stay and rebuild their neighborhoods. They have been putting their shoulders to the wheel personally, with special emphasis on those most in

need; rather than rugged individualists they are, in the words of one prominent Houston businessperson “rugged communitarians.”²¹

This is the Rotary clubs and the church groups, the Kiwanis and the Optimists, it is volunteerism that matters. What makes this unique is also what makes it unpredictable, there is no formal organization, there are not dues and no weekly or monthly meetings; but there is also very little, if any, warning as to when action is needed. Everyone knew a hurricane was headed toward Texas, so precautions were taken. No one knew that the storm would sit and spin over the Houston region for as long as it did, creating a situation where no amount of planning could have left the area properly equipped.

One of the arguments that began as the rain was still falling on Houston and the immediate surrounding area, was to ask why the local officials did not order mandatory evacuations. Aside from the fact that no one predicted the storm to sit over the Houston and barely move for such an extended amount of time, there is another truth that is hard to escape: if people had fled the region to other places, they would not have been around to help with rescues, displacements and the immediate recovery.

The Houston airports shut down after the storm, and many if not most freeways were shut down, as on and off ramps flooded, making entering and exiting impossible, and dangerous. Aside from those on the outside who had boats and could get close to flooded areas and coast in to start rescuing, there was not getting into Houston from the outside. This meant help had to come from within, the epitome of a “if not us, then who?” type of realization.

Worth noting again, the rescue and recovery efforts are but one facet to *Renewing the American Neighborhood*. Think about your own neighborhood, and think about Nicole Morales’ comment on Fox News, rescue and recovery as the result of a natural disaster will be rare, but community does not end there. What if in the brutal heat of the summer a community loses power for a day, who checks in on the elderly and the disabled? Who checks on the single mother who helps with local school raffles and church festivals when time allows her that luxury?

Of interest, Peggy Noonan wrote of the Texas spirit in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial about a week after the storm began. Ms. Noonan took to a “hold the line” theme that was prominent at the moment because of a speech given by Secretary of Defense James Mattis to some American soldiers stationed overseas during a visit with them. Secretary Mattis said.

“You just hold the line until our country gets back to understanding and respecting each other and showing it, of being friendly to one another. That’s what Americans owe to one another—we’re so doggone lucky to be Americans.”²²

Secretary Mattis is correct of course. And we are indeed in the midst of times of turmoil when it comes to our national dialogue and even in our civil discourse. Solving that problem is important, because at root we are talking about a nation of strangers that ultimately unite for a common purpose when the times call for it.

Reiterating this sentiment, Sheri Faye Rosendahl, writing for HuffingtonPost.com in a piece titled “Houston – You Are The Change Our World Needs To See” stated,

“Our nation as a whole needs to follow Houston’s lead and come together, not only to overcome the turmoil of this storm, but to overcome the turmoil of the oppressive divide we are seeing every day in our nation.”²³

Writing about local liberty and freedom, Ed Hubbard reminds us of the following,

Remember Liberty is based on a certain type of freedom: freedom from the control of our lives by an anointed elite (hereditary, tribal, political, or religious) and their laws. Liberty is not based on a right to be free from our neighbors, or from forming the bonds needed for a society to exist and thrive. To be able to exercise Liberty and have it endure over time, our freedom must exist interdependently with our mutual responsibilities to our family, our neighbors, our communities, and our country. In essence, freedom without civic engagement is not Liberty, it’s an empty cult of personal autonomy that rots the life of a society.²⁴

Localism is not just about helping recover from disasters, it is a way of life that makes neighbors out of strangers and allows for self-governance.

In Conclusion

Ed Hubbard several years ago related a story from two Robert Putnam books *Bowling Alone* and *Better Together*, the story of the “Tupelo formula.” Summarizing this story, Hubbard wrote,

The editor of the local newspaper personally met with the leading businessmen along Main Street and convinced them to jointly invest in a stud bull to be used to expand the dairy business. For an initial private investment of \$50,000 the county got its bull, and a 60-year period of unprecedented economic growth started. By agreement of the town’s business and political leaders, the initial returns from the expanded dairy business were reinvested into the dairy business, into other business ventures, and into the community. Eventually, all of the investors made a profit, but the town got much more.²⁵

And later, Hubbard broke this “formula” down into parts to make it relevant to the world as it exists today,

I want to focus on the type of steps taken by the civic leaders in Tupelo to address the needs of the community, which are relevant to the Neighborhood model I am advocating. Let’s break them down:

- The community faced a problem that appeared intractable, and that had been confounded by multiple events—not unlike the confounding factors of under-education, under-employment, chronic crime and poverty, and the impulse to be “left alone”, which exist in many of our neighborhoods today;
- One person, followed by a group of civic leaders, saw a strength within the community that created an opportunity that could be exploited to help the community address its problem;
- These citizens had the courage to take a risk with their own resources to take advantage of the opportunity and to share the gain with the community;
- These citizens involved businesses, private organizations, and local government in both the planning and the implementation of their plan; and
- The gains to the community were both short-term, and long-term, and were broadly shared—*e.g.*, businesses were created and expanded, employment grew, per capita income grew, and schools improved.²⁶

Renewing the American Neighborhood has been an idea for several years now, we have pushed the discussion in various places. We plan to expand our "operation" and increase our presence now, especially while the topic is fresh, and the nation watched lived on television or on social media as the evidence actually unfolded, this was not a college lecture or a book from the 1950s, this was real life happening in the present. It provided us with a textbook example of what we can achieve, if we return liberty to the local levels and empower people to not willingly be victims, but to be active not only in answering the questions, but in asking them.

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ENDNOTES

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RenewingAmericanNeighborhood.com

