

# When Bureaucracy Fails:

Virtually everyone who has ever worked in a corporate structure is aware of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy provides focus and divides work into useful parts. It is governed by rules and a hierarchy. Bureaucracy is generally a “safe and effective” way to manage. However, bureaucracy is not without its flaws, and when it fails it can fail with horrendous consequences primarily because it cannot adapt to quickly changing circumstances.

The Lahaina, Maui disaster is a disaster of bureaucracy gone wrong at virtually all levels of government from the local town government to the Hawaiian state response and ultimately to the federal malaise of the Biden administration.

The Lahaina disaster didn't start a couple of weeks ago, it started about 5 years earlier when a prior hurricane off the shore of Maui created quite similar conditions to the ones that led to the early August 2023 firestorm. Thus, the first failure of bureaucracy was one of ignoring a warning from the past when there was opportunity to prevent disaster.

The early response to the oncoming firestorm was somewhere between stupid and evil. Lahaina's sophisticated warning system wasn't activated presumably because it would have misinformed the public about a Tsunami rather than a firestorm in the hills. Then, the Lahaina fire department began to run out of water to fight the fire. It pleaded with a governmental agent in charge of the environment to release reservoir water. It took something like 5 hours to get approval for this request and by that time the situation was fully out of control. Thus, the second failure of bureaucracy was a failure to understand situational urgency and throw out the rules and regulations.

The subsequent response of the Hawaiian and the federal government was pathetic. After the loss, aid was provided but essentially at a leisurely pace, and most of the most notable governmental response has been to hide the death toll. (President Biden bothered to show up for a photo op about 2 weeks after the disaster. The US Navy stationed in Pearl Harbor some 150 miles away didn't leave port to assist. FEMA was so inept that they got in the way of citizens trying to assemble food, clothing, and shelter for the injured or newly homeless.) Thus, the third failure of bureaucracy was emphasis on covering up rather than exposing the needs. (The news media is very much complicit in this.)

After the firestorm, Lahaina was fully blockaded by the various authorities. People were prevented from getting access to their destroyed homes and the bodies of their children. This has led to a variety of conspiracy theories among which is that the firestorm was planned so that the Hawaiian government could confiscate the Lahaina land – and there is definitely credence to this conspiracy thanks to the words of the Hawaiian governor. Among the most bizarre conspiracy theories is that the fire was started by a directed energy weapon fired from space – however, theories run the gamut from homeless campfires, to trees on electric wires, to improper mufflers on motorcycles, to aging propane tanks, to anything you want to include. Thus, the fourth failure of bureaucracy was a failure to appreciate the human needs of those in pain rather than the government's need to control what had already been devastated.

News reports say that just over 100 deaths have been confirmed. However, the intensity and heat of the fire incinerated many bodies. Potentially as many as 2000 lives were lost. (Notably, the schools had been closed on the day of the firestorm because of high winds so the assumption is that the majority of lives lost were those of children.) To put the death toll in perspective, some 3000 people were killed by the 9/11 terrorist attack.

Having worked for the federal government in the area of basic research and advanced technology, I am well aware of the negatives of bureaucracy. New ideas, particularly if they conflict with the status quo, are resisted in virtually every way possible because they consume resources. Program stonewalling to protect the sanctity of an established budget is beyond common. The Lahaina situation is one of political stonewalling. The political bureaucracy protected its turf. It did not protect the people which is its primary responsibility under the American Constitution.

OpEd by Bob Warren