The readings do a tremendous job of tracing the history of emergency management in this country, the role of the Federal government in disaster management and how it has changed over the years and why the federal government got into emergency management in the first place. The authors acknowledge that, changes in emergency management policies in this country are event driven and this can be seen throughout the history of emergency management as has been outlined in both books. Disastrous events influence the policies that are put in place to decrease the burden of future occurrences.

Federal government involvement in emergency management can be traced as far back as the 19th century when a governmental act was passed to provide financial assistance to a New Hampshire town that had apparently being devastated by fire. Rubin however notes that federal government involvement was ad hoc and reactive until the later half of the 20th century. There wasn’t an all encompassing policy regarding emergency management in the United States. Federal response was usually disaster specific and services that were offered also varied. This can be explained largely to the governmental notion that federal response and relief was not their responsibility—(Claire Rubin- Emergency Management: The American Experience 1900-2005).

The nature of Emergency Management changed significantly after the World War 2. A period in which both readings describe as the period of the Cold War and the need for Civil defense readiness for enemy attacks. The federal government involvement at this stage was through the office of the Federal Civil Defense Administration who mainly provided technical assistance. It was also the period where government passed the Federal Disaster Relief Act. This act, as noted by Rubins was important for three reasons- 1) Waiting time for assistance was reduced since affected areas did not have to wait on congress. 2) The act gave the White house more authority to decide who gets what, when and how through the federal government and 3) It increased the commitment of the federal government to provide certain types of assistance pre and post disasters.
The late 70s witnessed the reorganization plan number 3 which aimed at consolidating preparedness, mitigation and response activities into one organization instead of it being under more than 5 different organizations. This action gave birth to the Federal Emergency Management Agency with its head reporting directly to the president. FEMA had its share of successes and failures in the 80s until James D. Witt took over as its head in the Clinton era and infused some life into what many saw as a troubled agency. Terrorism became an important focus of FEMA after the September 11th attacks through 2003 when it became part of the Department of homeland Security.

The failures of FEMA after Hurricane Katrina was widely documented and increased attention to the weaknesses in the emergency management system that needed to be addressed. One important question that is raised in the readings and could potentially be a good topic for class discussion is “Was FEMA solely to be blamed for the failures of Katrina?

Haddow, Bullock and Coppola think otherwise. They believe that FEMA’s failures with regards to Katrina evolved from the same policies that the Bush administration had put together. Firstly FEMA as an agency had lost its autonomy post 9/11 when it was absorbed into the DHS. The director of FEMA was no longer at par with other cabinet ministers. Secondly FEMA’s resources- funding and personnel were redistributed by the DHS to support other activities which they deemed as superior in the department. This move left FEMA with very little and decreased strength. Lastly post September 11th saw a shift from an all hazards agency to a focus on terrorism. Terrorism took center stage and weakened the agency’s grip on other possible calamities. These were a few of the reasons among many others that were discussed as being contributory factors for the failures of FEMA on the Katrina issue. It is important to ask however to ask the following, -Was the move to place FEMA under the DHS a wise one? Will FEMA be better off and more effective as an independent unit? Were the changes and legislations made after Katrina a lasting solution to the problems of response and preparedness in our society?