**Civics 101**

**Episode 84: FEMA**

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**OPEN:** [00:00:04] Who is the current speaker of the House? I don't even know. Who will rule in the president's favor? Will they send it to the Supreme Court? You can't refer to a senator directly by their name. Congressional redistricting. Separation of power. Executive orders. The national security council.

[00:00:19] Civics -- civics -- civics 101.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:23] In Virginia Prescott and this is Civic's 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. Today the federal agency we don't hear much about until disasters strike. FEMA the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It's an agency that's been through a number of organizational storms of its own and mission shifts and organizational shuffles. Garrett Graff is an historian and journalist who wrote The Secret History of FEMA for Wired and Garrett, welcome to Civics 101.

**Garrett Graff:** [00:00:51] Thanks it's my pleasure to be here.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:52] First of all broad picture what is FEMA?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:00:55] Civilians best know FEMA as the agency that steps in after a natural disaster you know your hurricanes your earthquakes or tornadoes or massive fires in California as we're experiencing right now.

[00:01:09] But FEMA has a much more complicated historical legacy in the United States government and also even today a secret mission that most people don't know which is that FEMA started as the agency that was in charge of responding to nuclear war. It was the emergency planning emergency preparedness office that sort of traces its roots back to 1950 when Harry Truman founded the Federal Civil Defense Administration.

[00:01:36] And it sort of evolved through about a dozen different agencies over the next quarter century up to the modern creation of FEMA under Jimmy Carter in 1979.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:47] Wow. So that's pretty fascinating. How were natural disasters handled before the origins FEMA?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:01:55] The short answer is the federal government had very little to do with natural disasters until the 1950s and 1960s and FEMA and sort of its predecessor agencies were building up this knowledge about how to respond to emergencies. They were creating stockpiles. They had all of this expertise on staff about how to respond to a nuclear war. And luckily we don't have all that many nuclear wars. And so FEMA ended up getting pressed into, beginning in the 1960s, responding to natural disasters. And now that has sort of become its main public role and certainly effectively the only way that most civilians ever interact with FEMA is during you know a flood or a hurricane, tornado, earthquake or some other catastrophic event.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:51] So after that transition from this Cold War era ethic, what is its mandate now?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:02:57] So FEMA today obviously still is responsible for responding to those natural disasters but it has a much broader portfolio than just that. It also runs things like you know fire academies and does a lot of sort of emergency management planning and training. And today it is still actually the agency in the federal government in charge of what's known as continuity planning which are all of the strange plans that the U.S. government would launch in the event of a nuclear attack or a terrorist attack or radiological, biological chemical terror attack. You know FEMA is the agency that on a minute by minute hour by hour basis tracks everyone who is in the presidential line of succession so that if there is a catastrophic attack on Washington FEMA knows who the next person to be president of the United States would be.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:56] Which agency doesn't actually report to or -- where is it in the government structure?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:04:00] Under the most recent reorganization, it became part of the Department of Homeland Security in 2004. So the head of FEMA reports up to the secretary of homeland security and that sort of all part of that DHS sort of unified effort to help protect the homeland. There was actually sort of a brief effort in the mid 2000s to rebrand FEMA as emergency management in Preparedness Directorate as part of DHS. But in the wake of Hurricane Katrina they ended up keeping the FEMA brand and sort of building you know trying to re professionalize and rebuild FEMA itself.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:48] Tell me about preparedness. FEMA operates in triage mode for the most part. Natural disasters can cause just incalculable damage on a human and infrastructure scale. How does FEMA work on preparation as well as recovery?

[00:05:04] So FEMA is the primary government agency for all emergency planning. So you know obviously it is most public in responding to disasters but it doesn't respond to disasters without pretty detailed plans about how that response effort would work. You know sort of FEMA is effectively divided as an organization between sort of a planning team and a response team and that planning team is running scenarios all of the time. You know they they have sort of their list of what catastrophic disasters would look like around the country and sort of what the most likely disasters are and how the government would respond to them. And so you know some of that is geographically specific. I mean FEMA has all sorts of contingency plans and exercises that it runs regularly with federal state and local officials in the Pacific Northwest responding to a massive earthquake that someday we know will hit the Cascadia subduction zone in the Pacific Northwest. You know you have plans for earthquakes along the San Andreas and in California, hurricanes and in Florida as well as super volcanoes in Yellowstone but then also they do a lot of urban emergency response. They ran along with state and local officials a big exercise actually early in 2017 known as Gotham shield that was sort of prepared for and ran. How New York City would respond to a 10 kiloton nuclear explosion from either a terrorist or a rogue North Korean missile.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:51] So how about this kind of modeling in performance, how is FEMA doing as an organization in responding to the disasters that have happened?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:07:00] FEMA has a pretty checkered history through least sort of the modern era dating back to the creation of the modern FEMA in 1979. It really struggled through the 1980s and early 1990s and really blew the response to some pretty major incidents like the Northridge earthquake hurricane Andrew in Florida and then actually Bill Clinton did a tremendous job rebuilding FEMA under the then FEMA Director James Lee Witt who is probably the best director FEMA has ever had. And then we all remember how FEMA in 2005 bungled the response to Hurricane Katrina under George W. Bush and that was the era of Michael you're doing a heck of a job Brownie Brown with President Bush and sort of FEMA became the laughing stock of the federal government again. It's sort of clawed its way back to respectability under Craig Fugate who was the administrator for most of President Obama's terms. And now Broch Long, the administrator who just took over in the middle of the summer under President Trump has done I think probably a decent job not a stellar job but not a terrible job in responding to a pretty unprecedented set of hurricanes that we've seen in the Gulf Coast in Florida in Houston and particularly in Puerto Rico which has been an epic disaster sort of unlike anything we've seen in modern times.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:33] Ye, FEMA has had to respond to hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, a lot of criticism for the difference in the agency's responses to this too. Did you discover that in your research on FEMA?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:08:45] FEMA's sort of fatal flaw which has always existed literally going back to the creation of the FCDA in 1950. Is that FEMA actually is pretty limited in what's its own response capabilities are. It does not have a lot of you know FEMA planes, FEMA ships, FEMA buses of its own. It's reliant upon other agencies and sort of a whole of government response which is a phrase you'll hear a lot in talking to people who work in emergency management. And I think that's where you have seen a lot of challenges in Texas and Florida and the Gulf Coast and particularly in Puerto Rico which is you know FEMA can have these wonderful plans these highly detailed contingency documents in response scenarios. But absent the governmental weight and governmental focus to actually bring resources at a mass level to bear it sort of not really up to FEMA to be able to respond at the scale necessary in a large disaster.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:58] Oftentimes FEMA funding is one of the things that gets cut or gets debated on the floor of Congress and there's a resistance to funny things up front. But after a disaster, Congress inevitably votes on recovery bills this fall it was thirty six point five billion or something like that for the Hurricanes. Harvey Maria and Arema so are they fighting an uphill battle -- in some ways FEMA is insurance, right? You know you're putting money forward in case of a disaster.

**Garrett Graff:** [00:10:28] That's exactly right. And it's in case of a disaster that we don't really know when it will arrive how it might arrive where it might arrive or how big. And that's the perennial budget fight for FEMA which is it. It's very easy to try to trim money out of the FEMA budget when you don't need an emergency response which is actually what the Trump administration was trying to do early in 2017 was to cut money out of emergency management grants and FEMA as budget to help pay for the border wall and the border security initiatives that the Trump administration wanted to roll out and that money is easy to appear to be fungible when you're not in the midst of a crisis.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:22] What is famous budget now?

**Garrett Graff:** [00:11:24] FEMA's budget right now is about 13 billion dollars. That's it sort of year to year budget. Of course it sort of goes up dramatically as you said in years when there are response scenarios or natural disasters or catastrophes that it needs to be responding to. And it pays for a lot of teams around the country. FEMA runs sort of regional centers and 10 regions around the country that it breaks down the entire country into and in each of those places it sort of has its own FEMA regional command center and actually sort of a nuclear bunker at each of those facilities as well.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:03] And when does it pull out of a disaster area? You know, hand things off from let's say recovery to rebuilding.

**Garrett Graff:** [00:12:10] It's very often years FEMA once it arrives it is usually there for you know certainly weeks almost always months and in many cases years. There's also sort of a misunderstanding I think about what FEMA has role should be and what the federal government's role is supposed to be which is something that you very much saw in Katrina and even actually in Harvey this year which is the federal government. When you talk to them and if you sort of look at their plans and procedures is pretty open about the fact that it's not going to be responding to a disaster until three five seven days afterwards that that first window of time certainly the first 24 hours certainly the first 48 hours often even the first 100 hours people need to be prepared to be on their own. That's the responsibility of individuals to be repaired and that they are going to be relying on local and state authorities to help them as best they can. But really the federal government is not going to come in and save you in till three five seven days afterwards.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:24] Garret, is that the most important takeaway for you? Having looked deeply into the origins and now the functions FEMA, that there is a gap between expectations and what FEMA can actually do.

**Garrett Graff:** [00:13:36] There's a huge gap between both what people think FEMA should do than what FEMA is capable on its best day of doing and then even sort of a larger gap beyond that of what FEMA is capable of. You know in the midst of an unfolding disaster along with all of the rest of the federal government which is you know very often you know sort of slow and bureaucratic even leaving aside FEMA which is something that you really saw hobble the Katrina effort and that this is improved a little bit over the years.

[00:14:13] But you know anyone listening today you know as you sort of think through whatever the natural disaster or catastrophic incident might unfold wherever you live geographically you know you really do need to realize that you are going to be on your own for at least the first 72 hours after a disaster.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:14:34] Thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Garrett Graff:** [00:14:36] My pleasure. Garrett Graff is an historian and journalist and author of Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government's Secret Plan to Save Itself While the Rest of Us Die. He wrote about FEMA's little known origins for Wired.

[00:14:52] And that is it for today. You can keep in touch between episodes with extra credit. That's an information-rich weekly newsletter to expand your understanding of topics we cover. Plus visuals, teacher's pets, etc.. Sign up at our website, civics101podcast.org. And while you're there, ask your question about how American democracy works. This episode was produced by Jimmy Gutierrez. Music from Broke for Free. I'm Virginia Prescott. Civics 101 as a production of định PR.