

ALFONSE D'AMATO

Can natural disasters help restore national unity?

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Hurricane Harvey was a brutal reminder that storms happen. We Long Islanders who lived through Hurricane Sandy, like Louisianans who lived through Hurricane Katrina, can only shudder to think what our fellow Americans in Texas are going through right now.

The utter devastation that flowed from these storms is proof that in many ways we are all at the mercy of Mother Nature. But what these disasters also prove is that the U.S. is truly one indivisible country, and that when one part of America is hurting, all Americans must help.

One of the best exemplars of that imperative is Long Island's own native son, U.S. Rep Peter King. When Hurricane Sandy hit — and 10 years earlier, when terrorists struck the World Trade Center on 9/11 — King sprang into action and worked tirelessly to secure aid for our battered but not beaten state. The success of his efforts hinged largely on the fact that his career in Washington has

established him as a man who puts the good of the nation above party or region. King's reputation as a congressman who can empathize with the needs of his fellow lawmakers paid off greatly for New York as we rebuilt from Sandy and the Sept. 11 attacks.

That's why it was so good to hear King be among the first to call for a national effort to assist Texas with its storm rebuilding efforts. It's an example for other Washington elected leaders who haven't always been so broad-minded about helping people in other parts of the country. Someone like Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who refused to support Sandy aid because he thought it was too generous to New York, must now hope (and pray) that more of his colleagues are like Peter King than himself.

We need more of our leaders in Washington to find ways to put aside petty politics and work together for the good of the nation. The political sniping that's been going on in D.C. isn't good for the country. When Democrats and Republicans act like bitter enemies rather than just political opponents, they do real harm to our national unity. But when they work for the common good, great things can happen.

I learned that very early in my Senate career. I've always considered myself a proud New Yorker and a loyal Republican. But because for most of my years on Capitol Hill one or the other of the two houses of Congress was in Democratic hands, I had a choice to make: party or people first? I always tried to come down on the people's side.

Sometimes that meant working with fellow members of Congress with vastly different outlooks and constituencies from mine. Many of the powerful senior members of Congress in those days were old-line Southern Democrats like Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia, or Rep. Tom Bevill of Alabama, who chaired a powerful House committee that oversaw appropriations for all major infrastructure projects across the country. They had about as much in common with me as bagels have with cornbread.



But when a terrible environmental problem arose in western New York at an abandoned nuclear waste site, I went to Bevill for help. It just so happened that he had championed a major public works project in his part of the country, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, to improve navigation in the nation's interior. I had supported the project, against the vociferous complaints of Eastern environmentalists, because I felt that the decisions of local representatives should be respected. Thank goodness I did, because when I went to Bevill to request the billions of dollars needed to remediate that dangerous nuclear site, he came through for New York, recalling that I had shown his region the support I thought it deserved. Today, Tennessee-Tombigbee has proven to be a boon to the Alabama economy, with none of the dire environmental consequences naysayers had predicted, and the environmental mess at the West Valley Demonstration Project, near Niagara Falls, has been steadily cleaned up.

That same sort of respect for and cooperation with other points of view and regional diversity is what is so missing right now. Just look at the ideas for tax reform bubbling up in Washington. Some leaders with a particular grudge-for-no-good-reason against New York are toying with the notion of eliminating both the federal tax deduction for state and local taxes and the home mortgage interest deduction. These two moves would disproportionately affect states with higher housing costs and higher state and local taxes. Now, I'm not defending New York's higher taxes, but getting whacked by both Albany and Washington would only hurt our taxpayers more.

Luckily, there may just be enough members of Congress like Peter King to bring the same responsible leadership to tax reform that they've brought to other challenges facing America. For whether it's rebuilding from natural disasters or terrorist attacks or just trying to lighten our federal tax base and spur economic growth, what's good for all is best.

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