Public Lecture

Do People Ever Learn from Disasters?
A Revision of the Idea of Event-Driven Policy Change

Monday, October 5
3:30-4:50 pm
Wilder Auditorium

For twenty years, I have been arguing that disasters provide opportunities for policy change and learning, with the idea that such change and learning constitute improvements in policies. Recent events across a wide range of disaster types and industries – ranging from hurricanes to mass violence to nuclear accidents to oil spills – suggests that this learning doesn't often occur. While the immediate aftermath of these events is replete with various voices listing the "lessons learned" after a disaster, these lessons – to the extent they are lessons at all – are usually "lessons observed," with little follow-up to show whether they were learned at all.

This failure to learn is a feature of both public and private sector organizations, and in this address, I will draw on examples from all sectors to show when actual policy improvement does occur, when it does not, and will offer some reasons why, in the long run, lessons of disasters often need to be "relearned" before effective action is taken. I will conclude with some comments on climate change, and will review why discussions of long-term climatic change are different from discussions that follow clearly defined disasters. In this context, the prospects for event-driven policy change related to climate change are not good.

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