

## Events of 2001 taught us lessons - and one of them is about government

John Burbank; News Tribune Columnist

It got about as bleak as it is going to get last weekend, between the pouring rain and the dark of December. But soon, the sun will start lingering a little longer each day. So it is appropriate to celebrate this day and the hope the new year can bring.

Remember Feb. 28 and the Puget Sound earthquake? It seems years ago that the 6.8-magnitude tremor cracked the Capitol dome.

What is remarkable about that earthquake is what it did not do. One person died of a heart attack attributable to earthquake stress. But no one else - not one other person - died. Buildings remained standing, freeways did not collapse and life returned surprisingly quickly to normal.

Who do we have to thank? Our government. That's right, the government that through democratic deliberation and legislation created building codes to sustain structures under stress. The government that mandated decent wages for the workers who built our public structures. The government that pays civil engineers to monitor roads, bridges, and dams and brings in public workers and private contractors to fix these vital parts of our infrastructure when they need fixing.

Earthquakes show us our smallness in the big picture of life. And earthquakes don't distinguish between rich and poor. It is nature's way of telling us that we are all in this together. Similarly, our preparation for and response to natural disasters are not possible with a winner-take-all mentality. People lived through the Puget Sound earthquake because we as a society, through our governments, made sure that our buildings and roads were secure.

Then came Sept. 11. We as a people realized that our government is what stands between us and terror and death. Not IBM, not Boeing and not McDonald's, but the United States government and the Washington state government, and the county and city governments. Not private interests more concerned with profit than well-being. Not individuals taking the law into their own hands. Not self-interest blocking the way of the public good. But democratic government. It makes you want to vote, to make sure that you have a voice in creating the best public policy possible for individual and national security. We are all in this together - through earthquake and terror and through war and recession. So it is time to think of what we can do to create economic security, opportunity and hope for all of us. The president and Congress have yet to agree upon an economic stimulus package. It almost feels as if they have already forgotten about the people left in the wake of the recession, as if we as a country have no responsibility and no need to care for people who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

But if we have learned anything over the past 12 months, we have learned that we do have a responsibility to our fellow citizens. What can we do?

We can make sure that all unemployed workers get unemployment compensation. We can make sure that programs for retraining are in place and funded so that these workers can get good jobs as the economy

recovers. We can make sure that the government pays for these workers' health care insurance, since they won't be getting that coverage from their former employers.

We can figure out a program of mortgage insurance, so that their houses are not taken away from them. We can give tax rebates to the middle- and low-income workers who we know will spend this money and in that way help keep our economy moving.

And we can make sure that our public institutions - like our public schools, our universities, our community colleges, our libraries, our public health system, and our firefighters and police forces - are not starved for dollars, but are funded so that they can continue to create security, hope and opportunity for us and for the people next door and down the street and across the city and the mountains.

It is a good jingle for our times: We are all in this together.

Happy holidays. - - -

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