

PAYING FOR CLIMATE CHANGE BY GUTTING PROGRAMS TO DEAL WITH IT

Brian Beutler has a post predicting that Eric Cantor will do the same thing with Irene disaster aid he did with hypothetical aid to his own constituents after the earthquake: demand budget cuts to pay for any aid.

Now, in the wake of Hurricane Irene – a much costlier natural disaster – Cantor may make the same demand, which could touch off a bitter fight on Capitol Hill.

“We aren’t going to speculate on damage before it happens, period,” his staff told me Thursday when I asked about the impending storm. “But, as you know, Eric has consistently said that additional funds for federal disaster relief ought to be offset with spending cuts.”

This is a big problem. The budget is already stretched very thin, and even Cantor has asked his members not to provoke another fight about cutting spending beyond its already agreed-upon levels. And if clean-up costs reach into the billions, paying for it by cutting spending will damage other important services, despite the fact that the usual standard is to not use natural disasters as political bargaining chips.

Three things are going on here by my count. First, Republicans have learned an obvious lesson since they retook the House – that they can control the agenda in Washington, and put popular government programs under attack, if and only if they have some leverage over Democrats to play along. The government shutdown fight in April was their first victory. The debt limit showdown was their *piece de resistance*.

Second, there are political pitfalls to this approach, particularly when it requires Republicans to publicly stake out specific positions. Cutting government spending might focus group well, but privatizing Medicare does not, as Republicans learned quite painfully earlier this year. This augurs for slashing spending in nebulous ways – capping discretionary spending, and spreading the cuts out across myriad federal programs; or promising to “find monies” in the budget to offset new expenses. Death by a thousand, invisible cuts.

Third, the right flank of the Republican party expects no less. In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina devastated southern Louisiana, Cantor’s predecessor, Rep. Tom DeLay (R-TX) claimed Republicans had pared discretionary spending back enough that federal aid could be financed with new debt. He came under attack from members of his own party and quickly reversed himself. Looks like Cantor learned his lesson.

At issue is, in part, the number of disasters FEMA has had to respond to, which has sapped its disaster release funds.

The size of Irene matters because the Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster relief fund has dipped below a key threshold.

It is now at \$792 million, congressional sources said Friday. Normally when the fund dips below \$1 billion, FEMA announces it can only meet the most immediate needs such as clearing debris.

On Saturday FEMA announced that because the fund had reached \$792 million, it had in fact reached immediate needs status.

The announcement prompted House GOP appropriators to blast the administration for allowing the FEMA funding standoff to continue to this point.

[snip]

Before Hurricane Irene and the Virginia earthquake, 2011 saw historic Mississippi river valley flooding, North Dakota flooding, and massive tornados in the Midwest and South.

The agency told Congress this summer it could need up to \$4 billion more in funding for a total of \$6.8 billion in 2012.

What all remains unsaid in this is that climate change is likely contributing to the increased disaster expenses this year. NOAA has a catalog of the nine "weather disasters" that caused more than \$1 billion in damages this year (this would not include the earthquake in any case, and only goes through August 15). In total, these events have done more than \$35 billion in damage, which is a record (again, that's before Irene's damages), and killed at least 594 people. Here's the damage done:

1. Groundhog Day blizzard, January 29- February 3: \$1.1 billion in insured losses, over \$2 billion total. 36 deaths
2. Midwest/Southeast tornadoes, April 4-5: \$1.6 billion in insured losses, over \$2.3 billion total, 9 deaths
3. Southeast/Midwest tornadoes, April 8-11, 2011: \$1.5 billion in insured losses, over \$2.2 billion total, zero deaths
4. Midwest/Southeast tornadoes, April 14-16: \$1.4 billion in insured losses, over \$2 billion total, 38 deaths
5. Southeast/Ohio

Valley/Midwest tornadoes,
April 25-30: \$6.6 billion in
insured losses, over \$9.0
billion total, 327 deaths

6. Midwest/Southeast tornadoes,
May 22-27: \$4.9 in insured
losses, over \$7.0 billion
total, 177 deaths

7. Southern Plains/Southwest
drought, heatwave, and
wildfires, spring-summer:
direct losses of over \$5
billion

8. Mississippi River flooding,
spring-summer: ongoing
losses estimated at \$2.0-
\$4.0 billion, 2 deaths

9. Upper Midwest flooding,
summer: ongoing losses over
\$2.0 billion, at least 5
deaths

Add to that the \$2.6 billion in estimated
insured losses with Irene (though as much as a
billion of that is in the Caribbean) and at
least 25 deaths in the US, and those billions
and those deaths begin to add up.

Yet in response, the Republicans have been
targeting programs—like clean energy vehicles—as
their “offsets” to disaster funding.

At some point, we’re going to need to address
this as “climate change” rather than just
“serial Mother Nature” requiring budget offsets.

Perhaps the way to force that issue is to point
out who is suffering because of this. The
biggest number of deaths came in Alabama and
Missouri, not the elite East Coast. The big
damages came in states like Texas, Oklahoma,
Missouri, Alabama, Tennessee, the Dakotas.

Climate change exacerbated weather events are devastating red states as much as the blue states Irene just hit. It is time to stop treating them as discrete events, paid for by cutting some of the same core government functions helping to deal with climate change generally. If Republicans are going to make this a fight, it's time to finally start pointing to how climate change denialism is killing the constituents of those denialists.