

# Disaster Response and the United States Army: The Role of the United States Army During Domestic Emergencies, Focusing on the Coordination of Civilian and Army Actions During Domestic Crisis

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The U.S. Army needs to codify a plan to integrate and exercise with local, state, and federal emergency response agencies to ensure flexibility, continuity of effort, resource utilization, and timely response. As environmental events increase, the populations in numerous cities in the United States are changing. **The COVID-19 pandemic marked a migration of people moving from urban to rural areas, with many** moving to southern and western states (Toukabri & Delbé, 2022). As the population of those cities increased, the number of emergency responders largely remained the same. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reports that the average number of emergency responders, including paramedics, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and law enforcement, per citizen ranges from 48 to 10,000.

Emergency response encompasses local, state, and federal agencies. Agencies at all echelons are required to communicate efficiently and effectively to ensure mission accomplishment. In September 1989, Hurricane Hugo's category four assault on the southwest coast underscored the need for a coordinated response. While it took the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) several days to respond and more than eight hours to declare some of the hardest-hit areas disaster areas, the U.S. military responded in their absence (McAllister, 2005). The response resulted in the most significant military surge to a natural disaster until Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Since January 2025, FEMA has reduced employee numbers by approximately 150 personnel (Gutierrez & Kroll, 2025). The reduction of personnel opens the door for increased response times and delayed responses. The gap created needs to be filled by other organizations, such as the U.S. Army.

## Authorities and Purpose for Disaster Response

Law/Directive	Primary Purpose	Who Can Invoke It?	Key Limitation/Feature
Stafford Act	Authorize federal disaster relief and emergency assistance	President, upon Governor's request	Does not authorize law enforcement functions
Posse Comitatus Act	Prohibit use of federal military for civilian law enforcement	N/A (It is a prohibition)	Exceptions must be authorized by Constitution or Congress
Insurrection Act	Allow use of federal military for domestic law enforcement	President	Suspends Posse Comitatus; used for rebellion/civil unrest, not typical disasters
DoD Directive 3025.18	Establish policy and procedures for DSCA	Secretary of Defense	Provides internal DoD guidance for executing DSCA missions

Figure 1: Descriptions of each act and directive, their primary purpose, who can invoke it, and each law and directive's key limitations and features.

When the U.S. military needs to provide an emergency response on American soil, the Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) is the foundational formal process that allows the intervention. Responding service members fill a support role for the civilian agencies at the location. The legal foundations that allow for the deployment of service members on U.S. soil are: The Stafford Act, The Posse Comitatus Act, The Insurrection Act, and DoD Instruction 3025.21, Defense Support of Civil Law Enforcement Agencies.

The graphic above outlines each act and directive, their primary purpose, who can invoke them, and the key limitations and features of each. Notably, the Posse Comitatus Act is a prohibition; therefore, it is not an act that requires invocation. Also, the Insurrection Act is significant: it suspends the Posse Comitatus prohibition, is invoked by the President, and is not used for typical disasters. "Typical disasters" are categorized as both natural (e.g., hurricanes) and man-made (e.g., terrorist attacks) (GovFacts, 2025). Additionally, the National Response Framework (NRF) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) are integral to emergency response. "The NRF establishes a new approach to coordinating federal and nonfederal resources and entities" (Lindsay, 2008, p.2). The NIMS works in conjunction with the NRF to ensure a proactive, systematic approach to emergencies at all echelons, regardless of the cause (DHS, 2017).

## **Continuity of Effort**

Civilian and military personnel working together is not a novel concept. As of June 2023, the number of civilian employees working in the Department of Defense (DoD) exceeded 700,000 (GAO, 2025). There is, however, a distinct difference between working with the military in a DoD capacity and during an emergency response. In an emergency response situation, civilian emergency managers are the lead. Military personnel can respond quickly, with the necessary equipment, and fill a support role. Past incidents have created tension during civil-military responses due to unclear roles and responsibilities. The lack of clarity led civilians to believe there was an issue with military mission creep (Bollen & Kalkman, 2022).

## **Recommended Way Ahead**

The current state of emergency response is best addressed through a federal decision mandate; however, in its place, there is a viable alternative. Retired Brigadier General Neal S. Mitsuyoshi broached this topic while attending the U.S Army War College in 2014. While the plan was succinctly outlined and seemingly attainable, it did not come to fruition. It is unclear why this plan was not adopted. Considering the Army's primary mission in 2014, with Afghanistan and Iraq as the primary focuses, adding a new mission to the service may not have been tenable at the time. Decision-makers may not have understood the scope of the emergency response issue and the need to implement a solution.

The foundation of BG (R) Mitsuyoshi's recommendation was the current FEMA regional alignment structure. To date, FEMA has 10 regions that span the United States (FEMA, 2025). BG (R) Mitsuyoshi proposed the creation of a Regional Domestic Response Force (RDRF). BG (R) Mitsuyoshi asserted that all components and services should be aligned to FEMA regions, based on unit assets and geographic proximity. The figure below outlines the proposed alignment. Each region outlined below contains at least two military component installations. Creating an RDRF from the units currently aligned to each region would streamline the emergency response. The RDRF units could be implemented on a rotational basis, with units rotating responsibility for responding based on a duty roster or patch chart. Implementing this way allows units to share responsibility while maintaining their current mission.



Figure 2: Graphic showing the proposed alignment of the RDRF and FEMA regions.

Currently, a federal emergency declaration activates the Stafford Act and allows for Title 10 service members to respond. Prior to the emergency declaration, state and local officials must submit a Request for Assistance (RFA). Without an RFA, military personnel cannot conduct a proactive response (Mitsuyoshi, 2014). The synergy created between the RDRF, other government agencies, and emergency management agencies will enhance the capabilities of all parties. The RDRF will be postured to provide clarity and recommendations specific to military support capabilities and capacity. Simultaneously, the RDRF will be the foremost authority on the distinctiveness of each region and on how best to provide an expedient response in times of crisis.

## Challenges

Resource constraints are an issue for this plan. As ARSTRUC 28-32 (2025) illustrates, all Army components are undergoing significant shifts. The units that are currently naturally aligned to FEMA regions may not be able to support in the event of a crisis. Additionally, Soldiers may be unable to respond due to ongoing missions. A comprehensive military approach may be needed to ensure a timely and robust response. Deploying service members with the necessary equipment from multiple locations may prove cost-ineffective. An RFA may not be possible if local and state emergency management teams are reacting to a no-warning incident. The inability to submit the requisite request will significantly increase response assistance time. Lack of regional alignment hinders units' ability to train with emergency managers and responders. Training as one fights helps ensure the establishment of lines of communication and that all participants understand their roles and responsibilities prior to being called to action.

## Conclusion

From fires to floods, in the last 10 years, the United States responded to more incidents than ever before (FEMA, 2023). Included yet not stated in the fact above, do these emergency incidents impact countless lives? As the resource-to-incident ratio for emergency response decreases, there is a clear need for coordination among emergency response agencies at all echelons and with the Army. Given FEMA's current state, the military will inevitably receive more requests to respond. If Emergency Responders and the Army do not take a proactive posture and codify collaboration, the United States

risks catastrophic consequences from the next large-scale disaster. The Regional Disaster Response Force is the best way to solve this challenge.

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