END RELIEF FOR SELF-INFLICTED NATURAL DISASTERS

Let's make America great again by rethinking a new federalism with respect to disaster relief. Let's start by aiding the afflicted states right away, whether for hurricanes in Texas and in Florida, wildfires in California or drought in the Dakotas. Let's end by exempting the self-inflicted components of those disasters from federal relief. Let private charities do that.

Of course I'm sympathetic to the plight of those whose lives have been ruined by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. And I'm heartened to see Americans coming from all points to one another's aid. This column is not for them. It's for the municipal, county and state governments that enhanced the exposure of their residents to harm, and for the political machines that put those so-called leaders in charge.

Texas is the Lone Star State. From 1836 to 1845 it was an independent republic much larger than New England. Following annexation by the United States, the state's historic ideology of standing alone remained. This was illustrated in 2013 when the Texas federal delegation to Congress voted overwhelmingly to deny federal aid for hurricane reconstruction for the Northeast in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy.

For decades, I've been cringing as the residents of greater Houston filled their wetlands, subdivided their flood plains, and paved an area half the size of Connecticut with runoff-prone impervious surface. This has taken place on a flat, clay-rich coastal plain with limited natural drainage. Yet in pursuit of unchecked development, many Texas municipalities flagrantly ignored the ABCs of watershed science. The predictable result was flooding beyond belief.

For decades, I've been cringing as the leaders of our petroleum industry, based in Texas, argued that climate change wasn't occurring, and that the potential intensification of storms was statistical fiction. Then came the wettest storm on record that dropped an astonishing 52 inches of rain in places. This storm was literally off the charts because the charts based on past flood statistics no longer apply. Things are different. The atmosphere holds more moisture because it's warmer - because we've warmed it. Having the oil mogul Rex Tillerson as secretary of state and Rick Perry as secretary of energy reveals how little American voters have learned.

For decades, I've been cringing as the residents of Florida intensified development of their shoreline and sprawled over land less than 10 feet above sea level. Though the building codes were improved after Hurricane Andrew, the sprawl in flood-prone areas continued unabated for the simple reason that the vast majority of Florida is flood prone. This is especially true for its largest cities. By the time the ice sheets finish melting, much of the state will be underwater.

And now Hurricane Irma has blown through, the fastest growing and fastest spinning Atlantic storm ever, and the one responsible for our largest and costliest mass evacuation. Had the eye of the storm taken a slightly different path, it could have been far, far worse. A new sea-level reality has arrived. The ambient seas are higher, mainly because the glaciers are returning borrowed water back to the oceans and because warmer water takes up more space. The transient seas are higher because storm surges are stronger because winds are stronger because the ocean is warmer. Florida's coastal cities are so low that massive pumping stations are standard infrastructure. Meanwhile, Republican Florida Sen. Marco Rubio refuses to see the climate elephant in the room.

I live on solid rock on a moderate slope in a town characterized by tectonic stability, a moist deciduous forest and gurgling brooks. I'm not concerned about earthquakes, volcanic eruptions,
tsunamis, storm surges, extreme droughts and 4-foot rainfalls. Though trees blow down and the power goes out for a few days, that's the limit of my exposure to natural disasters.

This isn't accidental. I chose to live where I do. And I'm lucky to live in a state where residents are broadly tolerant of environmental regulations. And I'm pleased that my congressional delegation will be charitable enough to vote to support cleanups in Texas and Florida.

But in the future, I suggest we reserve federal disaster relief for truly natural disasters, not to those of our own making.