When yellow fever struck Philadelphia, the nation’s capital, in 1793, the entire federal government fled the scene, offering no relief to the suffering or to local people who tried to help them. When fires, hurricanes, or other calamities devastated communities in the early republic, presidents who sent donations to local relief funds always emphasized that their contributions should be anonymous. When, if at all, did state or federal authorities offer humanitarian aid to disaster victims? Hardly ever. But the rare occasions when they did offer an interesting perspective on our own culture of disaster in twenty-first-century America.