The sight of rescue workers, the police and the Coast Guard, governors, mayors, and federal officials struggling desperately with the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina brings to mind Cohen's Law: "Government is the enemy until you need a friend." Bill Cohen, the former defense secretary, minted the phrase nine years ago when he was a Republican senator from Maine. He was speaking then of a plane crash and the public's hankering for more effective safety regulation. Cohen's point was that government-bashing is easy in good times for those doing just fine. But when disaster strikes, many turn around and ask why government didn't do more to prevent a catastrophe -- or why it wasn't doing more to relieve its effects.

The horrors in New Orleans and on the Mississippi and Alabama coasts are a frightful reminder of the fragility of our personal efforts to build solid and secure lives. The homes people saved for over many years and spent many more years maintaining and improving can be destroyed in an instant. Like so many other Americans, I tried to imagine, after we put our kids to bed, how my wife and I would feel if our own home were inundated with water, permanently ruined. How would we feel if our children found themselves not comfortably asleep but stuck in a rancid stadium with no food or water or plumbing? How would we feel if our neighbors' homes were also wiped out, our streets washed out, our lovely neighborhood rendered uninhabitable?

Yes, the communities people built over generations can disappear. Disaster can wipe away intricately constructed social bonds, not just property. Law becomes unenforceable. Some cast aside the social constraints that normally govern their daily lives and take
what they can as everything falls apart around them.

It turns out that our individual striving goes on within a web of social protections that we take for granted until they disappear. We rely on each other more than we know. The rich, the middle class and the poor -- all of us -- bank on law, government, collective action and public goods more than we ever want to admit. The dreaded word "infrastructure" puts people to sleep at city council meetings and congressional hearings. But when publicly built infrastructure -- those levees that held for so many years -- breaks down, we realize that the things that seem boring and not worth thinking about are essential.

One can hope that our individual generosity will pour forth to our fellow citizens suffering on the Gulf Coast. We can take some solace in the fact that for every looter, there is a sport fisherman who brought a boat up to New Orleans to help in rescue efforts. There is a Red Cross nurse caring for an injured person, a Coast Guard member conducting a daring rescue, a volunteer in a church basement comforting a homeless child.

Yet this is a moment in which individual acts of charity and courage, though laudable and absolutely necessary, cannot be enough. It is a time when government is morally obligated to be competent, prepared, innovative, flexible, well-financed -- in short, smart enough and, yes, big enough to undertake an enormous task. Not only personal lives but also public things must be put back together.

You wonder if this summer, with deteriorating conditions in Iraq and now this terrifying act of God, might make us more serious. This is said not to be a time for politics, and we can surely do without the petty sort. But how we pull our country together, make our government work at a time of great need, and share the sacrifices that war and natural catastrophe have imposed on us -- these are inescapably political questions.

How can we look Katrina's victims in the eye, say we care and yet not take account of how their needs should affect the other things government does? I'm sorry to raise this, but can it make any sense that one of the early issues the U.S. Senate is scheduled to confront this month is the repeal of the estate tax on large fortunes when we haven't even calculated the costs of Katrina? And why do we keep evading a national debate over who is bearing the burdens of a war that has dragged on far longer than its architects promised?

Katrina is the work of nature, but what happens from this point forward is the responsibility of political leadership. Is it possible that in the face of a catastrophe of this magnitude, Washington will not even bother to rethink our nation's priorities?