Opinion
EarthBeat



Trees sway in high winds as the Eaton Fire burns structures Wednesday, Jan. 8, 2025, in Altadena, Calif. (AP/Ethan Swope)



Thomas Reese

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Pasadena, California — January 14, 2025
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Whenever anything bad happens, too many people immediately look for someone to blame. We have seen that in the Democratic Party after the November election. We saw it in the chaos of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. We now see it in response to the terrible wildfires in Los Angeles County.

Everyone wants to be an editorial writer — who have sometimes been described as those who come on the scene of a disaster and assign blame. Smart editorial writers wait for the facts to be uncovered by reporters before they begin to point their fingers. But the temptation is strong to hand out blame before the dust settles.

We see this in the life of Jimmy Carter, who was written off as a failure by pundits at the end of his one-term presidency. Today, we recognize him as a man of values and integrity who, when met by insurmountable crises, took principled stands despite the political costs. Although not perfect, he was too easily panned by inside-the-beltway elites who sat on their hands rather than try to solve problems.

Likewise with the Los Angeles fires, Donald Trump, the serial liar, blames California Governor Gavin Newsom for the devastation. Others blame Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, who was unlucky enough to be on her way home from Ghana in West Africa when the fires started.

The fires have been devastating for the people of Los Angeles.

At least 24 have died, and the number will grow as police with cadaver dogs search the rubble for remains. Add to that those who are elderly and sick who will die because of the disruption and trauma of the evacuations.

Over 12,000 structures were destroyed or damaged, with thousands of families now homeless and workers jobless.

I grew up in Alhambra, minutes away from Pasadena where my niece has been living in an assisted living facility. Already suffering chronic pain from cancer and rheumatoid arthritis, she had to evacuate because of the fire threat with little more than her cat and the clothes on her back. At $450 a night, the hotel was clearly gouging the evacuees.

When she got back to her room, it was filthy from smoke, and the water was undrinkable. She was stuck because she had nowhere else to stay. Her room had also been ransacked for money and drugs. Since she had taken her money and pain pills with her, the idiots only got her cancer pills.

Meanwhile, she had just qualified for Medicare D on Jan. 1, and Humana, her new insurer, was demanding more paperwork before paying for pain medication, but the office of her pain doctor had burned down. She just could not get a break.

In truth, thousands of others were worse off than she was, but I report her story as an example of how problems can escalate out of control, especially for someone with limited resources and support.

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The fires are still burning, churches and charities are stepping up, government aid is promised, but nothing is going to make people whole again.

The governor is promising to sweep away regulations so people can rebuild homes and businesses. But this may simply set the stage for another disaster in 20 years. The only way some of these houses would be safe is to cut down every tree in the neighborhood and pave over every square inch of surface area. Also needed would be strict fire codes that would make the houses prohibitively expensive.

Californians must acknowledge there are simply parts of the state where they should not build homes. No politician is willing to tell this truth. Everyone wants to live in the foothills surrounded by trees, but this is a recipe for disaster.

These homes make it impossible for the state to do the controlled burns that are the only way to avoid catastrophic fires. These homes are not insurable. It would be better to buy out the owners and return the land to the wild.

The California dream home, which my parents built, was a house with a big front- and backyard and a two-car garage. But even California eventually ran out of space as the suburbs expanded into distant and risky areas.

A better solution to the housing shortage in California would be a state law allowing lots zoned for single-family dwellings to be replaced by duplexes. The NIMBY (not in my backyard) movement had made this politically impossible, but the Los Angeles fire is the kind of crisis that also is an opportunity to do something dramatic.

Enough of the blame game. California needs to find creative solutions to its housing crisis that do not set the stage for future disasters, do not require long commutes to work and provide affordable housing to the middle class.