A Growing Role for the President: America’s Consoler in Chief Questions

1. Why has President Obama had to take on the role of “consoler in chief” with increasing regularity?

2. What does this relatively new role reflect?

3. *Critical Thinking*: What type of tragedies should a president speak out on? Explain.

4. What has the president become a living symbol of according to Karen Hughes?

5. Why did President Harrison not visit the site of the Johnstown Flood of 1889?

6. *Critical Thinking*: How do you think the increase in media has impacted how President’s react to tragedies in the United States? Explain your answer.

7. *Critical Thinking*: Do you think it helps communities that have experienced a tragedy when the President comes to visit? Explain why or why not.

8. According to Adam Frankel why does Obama want to visit?

9. *Critical Thinking*: Make a prediction, do you think the job of “consoler in chief” will become more or less important to the Presidency? Explain your answer

A Growing Role for the President: America’s Consoler in Chief

By [Joe Heim](http://www.washingtonpost.com/people/joe-heim) May 22, 2013

When President Obama travels to Oklahoma on Sunday to meet with the survivors of Monday’s tornado, it will mark the third time this year that he has journeyed to a patch of America to console a community on behalf of the country. During his five years in office, this presidential ritual has become as familiar a symbol of sadness as the sea of stuffed animals and flowers that accompany these mournful scenes.

Beckley, Joplin, Tucson, Aurora, Tuscaloosa, the Jersey shore, Newtown, Boston, West. And now Moore. The national itinerary of woe has been full and wrenching for this president. The circumstances are always different, but the grief is a constant. And perhaps more than any president before him, Obama has had to take on the role of consoler in chief with increasing regularity, a result of a steady stream of tragedies and an increasing expectation that they all merit a presidential visit and embrace.

But this is a relatively new role for presidents, one that reflects not just the emphasis on an ability to communicate and express empathy, but also an increase in power to direct the federal government to assist in recovery. This evolving role is complicated by a number of factors, the most significant being the delicate deliberations required inside the White House after each tragic event about whether it requires the president to show up in person.

“I think the presence of the president has become a visible symbol of the presence of the American people, of their love and their concern and their prayers,” says Karen Hughes, who served as a top adviser to President George W. Bush. “And so the president goes to a site like Ground Zero or the Oklahoma tornado both to say the American people are here with you and also to say to the people there that the resources of the nation are behind you. And I think there’s become an expectation that that will happen.”

That expectation has become more pronounced in an era of never-ending news cycles and a preponderance of social media that can bring the unfiltered scope of disasters and despair to desktops and mobile devices in seconds. Tragedies — man-made or wrought by nature — are not new to America, but well before the advent of cable news and Twitter, many presidents were comfortable sending others in their stead.

The Johnstown Flood of 1889 killed 2,209 and wiped out thousands of homes, but although the incident took place just 200 miles from Washington, then-president Benjamin Harrison didn’t visit the site. One of the reasons suggests just how much the power of the president has changed over the past century or so.

“He seems to have been profoundly affected by the flood, but the role of the federal government was different then,” says Richard Burkert, chief executive of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association. Harrison relied almost entirely on the private sector to provide relief. “He didn’t conceive that the federal government would be involved in the recovery,” Burkert says. (Harrison did, however, contribute a personal check in the amount of $300, according to historian David McCullough’s book about the disaster.)

By contrast, when another horrendous flood hit Johnstown in 1977, taking 85 lives, President Jimmy Carter didn’t visit, either, but he declared eight Pennsylvania counties disaster areas and pledged federal assistance that would approach $200 million in the following year.

Harrison’s decision not to visit Johnstown wasn’t out of the ordinary. There is no record of President Ulysses S. Grant visiting Chicago after the great fire of 1871. Theodore Roosevelt didn’t travel to San Francisco after the devastating earthquake of 1906. And after the Tri-State Tornado, which ripped through Illinois, Indiana and Missouri in 1925 and killed almost 700 people, Calvin Coolidge remained in Washington, urging the Red Cross to assist in tornado relief work.

Limited transportation was obviously a factor in the decisions made by these presidents, but their presence at the scene was also not viewed as being imperative. That, obviously, has changed.

“There is an expectation that the president will be there,” says Adam Frankel, a former speechwriter in the Obama White House who worked with the president on the speech he gave after the 2010 West Virginia mine accident that claimed 29 lives. “And I think for [Obama], he sees the heartache and the destruction and he wants to be there. Obviously to make sure the resources of the government are there for them, but also if there’s something he and the first lady can do personally to lift spirits, he wants to do that.”

Indeed, lifting the spirits of a community, and by extension the nation, has become a much more important requirement of the modern president.