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‘They were not prepared’: After winter crisis, Texas will have to confront its energy, politics and culture

The historic storm and cascading disasters — power and water shortages — are forcing the state to take a hard look at its ideals and principles.

By Nic Garcia Feb. 20, 2021

Like so many Texans, LaShonda McGrew spent most of Sunday dazzled by the rare blanket of snow that covered her suburban Fort Worth home. It was beautiful, she told her husband, as they spent the day listening to sermons, sitting next to the fire and preparing for the workweek.



As the evening approached, the warnings of a more serious weather event started to pop up. McGrew paid attention. She audited her food and water. She placed candles and flashlights with fresh batteries throughout the house. The family charged extra cellphone batteries.

At about 1:30 a.m. Monday, the power went out.

“We were prepared for a few hours,” she said on Friday, recalling the historic and catastrophic events of the week. “But we weren’t thinking that it would never come back.”

McGrew, her family and more than 3 million other Texans would spend the next several days enveloped in the horrendous winter storm that crippled the infrastructure of the nation’s second-largest state. For more than 48 hours, the family huddled around a fire in their living room, rationing food and cellphone batteries to stay connected with other kin and monitor the news.

To pass the time, McGrew — whose nickname is Sunshine — and her family looked at photo albums. They played cards and imagined their vacation to somewhere warm. “It’s gonna get better,” they told each other.

It didn’t.

In the same week: The McGrew family would join half the state's population — about 13 million — as residents ran out of water or were forced to boil whatever dripped from faucets to ensure it was safe to drink.

"It's like a bad dream," she said. "It's hard to keep a good spirit when you don't know when things are going to end."

The cascading catastrophes not only tested McGrew's disposition but also the wherewithal of all Texans.

Parents kept their children warm, bundled in layers inside running cars. Friends offered up couches. Families mopped up flooded apartments. People lived off cookies and cooked on ice-covered grills. They melted snow to flush toilets. Texans jammed phone lines of energy companies and broke websites reporting outages. Politicians — if they didn't flee the state — pointed fingers rather than offer solutions.

As the snow and ice melts, the Lone Star State faces a host of questions — technical, political and cultural. What went wrong? Who is responsible? How do we avoid another crisis? And perhaps the most heady: Is the era of Texas exceptionalism — and the long tradition of individualism and carpe diem — over?

"They told us to be prepared," McGrew said, referring to local and state leaders and energy companies. "But they were not prepared. We're suffering because they weren't. Where's y'all's accountability? We're gonna have to pay for their screw-up."

The long, cold week

The Feb. 11, 133-car pileup on Interstate 35W that killed at least six people was prologue to a

chain of events that, all told, likely will add up to more than \$20 billion — the most costly weather crisis in the state's history.

The winter freeze — punctuated by two snowstorms — marked the first time all 254 counties were under a winter weather warning. The Dallas-Fort Worth area spent 139 consecutive hours at or below 32 degrees, tying the seventh-longest streak first set in 1942, the National Weather Service said Friday.



As several inches of snow began to accumulate throughout last Sunday, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, the agency that manages the state's power grid, warned of rolling blackouts if residents didn't turn down the heat.

Shortly after 4 p.m. on Feb. 14, Valentine's Day, Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins and a chorus of other local leaders began urging on social media for North Texans to conserve power.

The warnings were too late.

By 11 p.m., the Electric Reliability Council faced a stark choice: initiate short, controlled power outages or suffer a statewide blackout that could have lasted more than a month, officials said this week.

Local power distributors, such as Oncor Electric Delivery in North Texas, followed the directive and powered down neighborhoods with the goal of rotating outages.

It was suggested the rolling blackouts would last no more than 45 minutes. But a menacing mix of freezing temperatures, an unstable power grid, broken equipment, increased demand and diminished raw energy supplies prevented the rotation from happening as planned.

Many thousands of Texans were left without power for days. Oncor and the council, known as ERCOT, provided few details. Instead of powering people's homes, these organizations fueled mass confusion with mystifying tweets from their social media accounts and jargon-filled news conferences. Clogged phone lines and crashed websites where people were told to report outages provided no help.

Texans did what they could in the dark. They filled hotels to capacity. Others found refuge in warming stations, sleeping on buses. Some who stayed home lit small fires to huddle around. Too many had no choice but to layer up and pray.

Adriana Godines and her family in East Dallas went 40 hours without power. Her 10-year-old daughter, Andrea, woke up at night crying because she was cold.

"We were some of the lucky ones," she said.

By Friday, power had been restored to nearly every Texan. But the state and its people were already facing the next disasters. Grocery store shelves are barren. Water, if it's running, must be boiled in half the state. Homes, apartments and businesses are deluged.

Four feet of water flooded Friendship West Baptist Church's resource center in southern Dallas, said the Rev. Frederick Haynes. The 30,000-square-foot building includes a food pantry and gently used clothing store.

“We’re trying to save as much as possible,” he said. “People are literally dying and suffering, who did not have to die and who did not have to suffer, if Texas had been responsible to regulate institutions that are supposed to keep us safe.”

Rethinking Texas

As the power crisis unfolded, multiple news outlets reported that it hadn’t been more than a decade since Texas faced a similar crisis — a 2011 snow storm that collided with the Super Bowl.

Lessons were supposed to be learned. Changes were supposed to be made. But Texas kept being Texas.

“There is a strong strain of individualism and risk-taking in Texas,” said H.W. Brands, a historian at the University of Texas at Austin. “We’ll do what we want to now and worry about the future later. This is a case in which the future blew in and hit the whole state.”

Energy and infrastructure experts this week noted changes are necessary but cautioned against rushing to conclusions. It will be important to examine the entire system, they said.

Unanticipated problems are likely to surface.

While Texas became the poster child for failed infrastructure this week, it’s not an uncommon phenomenon, said DJ Gribbin, a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institute and former adviser to President Donald Trump.

“Everyone ignores infrastructure until there is a huge failure,” he said.

As part of the forthcoming investigation into what happened, Gribbin said, the state should not simply focus on broken equipment but think about its future as it deals with growth and new challenges.

Both Gribbin and Bruce Bullock, director of the Maguire Energy Institute at Southern Methodist University, said Texas’ deregulated system could work in its favor to innovate solutions and rebuild quickly.

Bullock warned that those proposing reforms must be apolitical — even after Texas’ power shortage became fodder for Democrats and Republicans.

“The more politicalized this gets, the less likely we are going to have meaningful solutions,” he said. “That’s directed at all sides.”

Time is of the essence since state lawmakers are in session until later this spring and won’t return until 2023, unless the governor calls a special session. If there was ever political will to

get something meaningfully done, now would be the time, said UT political scientist Victoria DeFrancesco Soto.

“We don’t need another study or a committee,” she said. “We need something that’s passed and signed by the governor.”

Fort Worth native Chequan Lewis said it will take more than updated infrastructure and new laws to fix the state.

“It’s important the rhetoric shift in our state,” he said. “I want leaders to be talking about solving problems together rather than pretend Texans would rather freeze to death than live in a regulated environment.”

Lewis — now a Dallas-based lawyer, business executive and civic leader focused on equity — said the state doesn’t have to abandon its “Texas exceptionalism” myth entirely. But the culture must evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st century, which are greater than any state can tackle.

“Texas has the capacity for even more greatness as a state,” he said. “But we have to set that as the intention.”

U.S. Rep. Beth Van Duyne, an Irving Republican, is ready to help rebuild the state’s grid — and reputation.

It’s personal for Van Duyne, who lost power for about three days and is now fixing broken pipes. As the temperature sunk to 42 degrees inside her home, she circled her fireplace with blankets and pillows, and played cards in between conference calls, checking on neighbors and constituents.

At one point, she also reread ERCOT’s warnings prior to the Arctic blast. They “clearly showed an overconfidence or profound misunderstanding of what we were facing,” she said.

Van Duyne, who sits on the House’s infrastructure committee, pledged federal resources and a Lone Star comeback.

“Texas will prove its exceptionalism in how well we respond, rebuild and create more secure energy generation and power infrastructure in the months ahead.”