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Institutional Failure in the Response to Hurricane Katrina

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The poorly executed response to Hurricane Katrina's flooding of New Orleans has probably resulted in hundreds of avoidable deaths.



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Effective responses to catastrophes can reduce the loss of life by fifty percent or more. The poorly executed response to Hurricane Katrina's flooding of New Orleans has probably resulted in hundreds of avoidable deaths. While weather related emergencies cannot be prevented, catastrophic disasters often can be. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is tasked with responsibility for the federal response to emergencies, and the confused and disorganized response to the flooding of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has spotlighted the agency's current failings.

Critical attention has been directed primarily at the apparent leadership failures of FEMA's Director, Michael Brown, and Michael Chertoff, who heads FEMA's parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Their public statements in the days following Katrina left the impression that neither seemed to grasp either the severity of the disaster nor the specific problems that needed to be addressed. But good leadership can never be guaranteed. Focusing on Brown and Chertoff distracts attention from the more serious problem, which is the institutional failure caused by FEMA's placement in DHS.

MISDIRECTION OF FEMA'S RESOURCES

Following 9/11, critics targeted bureaucratic failure as one of the primary factors that kept the federal government from preventing the attacks. Acting under the dubious dictum that doing something is

better than doing nothing, they urged the creation of a new cabinet-level agency to better coordinate the country's defenses and response. The result was the Department of Homeland Security, a Frankenstein's monster composed of all or parts of 22 federal agencies, including the formerly independent FEMA.

Seasoned observers immediately noted the difficulties of integrating these disparate agencies, most commonly noting that they were widely scattered around the Washington, D.C. metro area, with multiple incompatible computer systems, and very different bureaucratic cultures. Few asked the more serious question as to whether these agencies really had a common mission and ought to be together.

FEMA, as the federal agency with primary responsibility for responding to emergencies, might seem at first glance to be appropriately housed in DHS. After all, terrorist attacks undoubtedly create emergencies of the first order, and FEMA responded to the terrorist attacks in both Oklahoma City and New York. But those cases obscure two crucial characteristics of FEMA, which is that it is designed to (1) *respond* to (2) *all* emergencies, whether natural disasters or terrorist attacks. These two characteristics, that it is reactive, and encompasses all emergencies distinguish it from the major emphasis of DHS which is (1) *prevention* of (2) *terrorist attacks*.

FEMA's mission, then, is only partly coordinate with DHS's, and being a subordinate and relatively small

component has had its focus warped to DHS's primary purpose. To the extent that FEMA is forced to focus on its parent agency's mission, response to natural disasters will be underemphasized, leading to a lack of preparedness. This much was easily foreseeable at the time DHS was created. A 2003 Government Accountability Office report noted that FEMA's homeland security and non-homeland security tasks would be under separate DHS directorates, which "could complicate FEMA's historical all-hazards approach—a comprehensive approach focused on preparing for and responding to all types of disasters, either natural or manmade."¹

But only recently have the specifics of the complication come into focus. FEMA's funding and personnel have both declined since 9/11, with the result that it has lost 1 of its 3 emergency management teams. Further, 75% of the money it has dispersed to state and local agencies has been for terrorism preparation and response, rather than or all-hazards response preparation, suggesting that FEMA's efforts have been fundamentally redirected by integration into DHS. Even with better leadership the overriding imperative of the DHS to prevent terrorism would have hobbled FEMA in its ability to respond to non-terrorist related disasters.

Although it is politically difficult to downplay the threat of terrorism, natural disasters (including those, like Katrina, that result from a combination of human and natural factors) are a greater and more omnipresent danger. Adding up the death toll for Hurricanes Andrew (1992), Floyd (1999), and Charley/Frances/Ivan/Jean (2004), the Mississippi River flood (1993), and the Loma Prieta (1989) and Northridge (2004) earthquakes, these natural disasters have taken almost 500 lives and caused over \$150 billion in damages (in inflation-adjusted dollars). Katrina took (as of this writing) an additional 1,000 lives, and will have costs of \$200-300 billion. Wildfires, heat waves, blizzards, tornadoes, and numerous other hurricanes add hundreds more deaths and tens of billions of dollars to these loss categories. If an earthquake hits an

unprepared city, such as Seattle, St. Louis, or Charleston, all of which have experienced major quakes in the past, the loss of life will probably be in the thousands. 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center cumulatively cost more than 3,000 lives and between \$50 and \$100 billion in damages. Had the World Trade Center not collapsed, the death toll in the U.S. from terrorism would have been under 500. So terrorism, while a serious threat, is not the only significant threat the U.S. faces. In terms of human life, it may be equal with natural disasters, while in economic effects it is dwarfed by them.

WHAT NOT TO DO

A failure of this magnitude necessarily demands recommendations for change, but we must avoid the temptation to once again make changes based on the assumption that doing anything is better than doing nothing. Two proposals that have recently been floated by elected officials are classic examples of this. The first is the call for a "Hurricane Relief Czar." Somehow the belief has developed inside the Beltway that adding one more layer of bureaucracy, creating one more official position to oversee an issue, will turn failure into success. But historically this has not been the case. For years now the U.S. has had a Drug Czar with no noticeable effect on our success in the so-called war on drugs. President Nixon's appointment of an Energy Czar in 1973 led to the creation of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve—which Congress could easily have done on its own—but little else. In 1993 President Clinton appointed a Health-care Czar and an AIDS Czar. Since then, health care costs have continued to spiral while an ever larger number of Americans lack health insurance, and the prevalence of AIDS among young gay men has increased. It is hard to see exactly what a Hurricane Czar would actually do that FEMA can't do already, and it's important to remember that FEMA worked well in the past, before it was thrust into DHS. While the Hurricane Relief Czar would presumably be temporary, the precedent will have been set that FEMA can expect to be unnecessarily and unproductively thrust into a turf war following every major emergency.

While Hurricane Czar supporters propose a pointless and debilitating addition to the bureaucracy, President Bush has put forth a monstrously foolish proposal to make the

military the primary emergency response agency. There has been considerable discussion since Katrina about the *posse comitatus* act, passed after the Civil War, and Bush's proposal has reinvigorated that. But that act simply bans use of the military for domestic law enforcement, so making the military the primary emergency response agency would not be legally troubling. The real problem is that it is so institutionally inappropriate that it would create grave dangers, both internally and externally.

As political scientist James Q. Wilson has shown, each organization has a "critical task," and distractions from that critical task make the organization function poorly.² This is precisely what happened with FEMA. The military's critical task is to fight battles and win wars. In recent years the U.S. has also used its military more often for humanitarian missions. As our failure in Somalia showed, the military is not well designed for that role, both because of training and because of the sense of mission about its critical task. It is no better suited for being the primary emergency responder, although it can—and usually does—play a valuable supporting role. There are only two possible outcomes from this proposal: either the military remains focused on fighting battles, and does a poor job as primary emergency responder (which is most likely), or it shifts too much attention to emergency response and is diminished as an effective fighting force. We must also recognize that U.S. forces are stretched desperately thin right now, and an outbreak of conflict in any of several danger zones around the globe could demand the attention of all the remaining available troops. If such an event were to coincide with a disaster, one or the other would have to be left unattended.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Restore FEMA's Independence.* FEMA has—or at least used to have—a sense of mission that its critical task was emergency response. If it can keep or regain that, it will be a sufficient first-responder, and elevating some other agency to that position will be unnecessary. So the first and most general, but most important, recommendation is that FEMA be restored to independence, and that its mission be explicitly mandated as

all-hazards response. This would allow FEMA to concentrate its planning and resources on its historical mission. This would not negatively affect FEMA's ability to respond to terrorist attacks, because that would be one of the hazards to which they would be prepared to respond, just as they historically did both in Oklahoma City and New York.

2. *Coordinate, Don't Control.* Second, FEMA's primary responsibility should not be to try to handle all human needs in response to an emergency. There is always an abundant outpouring of aid from American businesses, which is often misdirected or obstructed because agency personnel are intending to be the primary source of aid or because of bureaucratic regulation. During Katrina, for example, numerous trucks of supplies were sidelined for days because they lacked the proper paperwork. FEMA should develop advance agreements with clothing suppliers such as Wal-Mart, K-Mart and others, grocery store chains for food, and package-delivery companies with airfleets like Fed-Ex and UPS to coordinate a response to any emergency that might arise. Relying on a diversity of sources and coordinating delivery is the quickest and most flexible way to bring help to a devastated region.

3. *Enhance Communication.* No resource is more valuable than information, and in the aftermath of Katrina, crucial information needed for efficient response was missing. Rescue workers were unaware of people trapped in various parts of the city, or what the conditions were in many of the shelters. The cause of this problem was poor communication, which in itself was a result of the immense geographic size of the disaster and its effect on telecommunications. The unsung hero of emergency response turned out to be the satellite telephone. FEMA should have large numbers of satellite phones and vast quantities of batteries on hand, prepackaged in shipping containers. These phones could be flown to disaster sites immediately, or even in some cases preemptively and widely distributed to both emergency

personnel and volunteers. Although a certain number of phones would inevitably disappear during the response period, the cost would be minor compared to the gains in coordination that reliable communication would make possible.

In short, there is no need to reinvent emergency response. We should simply look back to FEMA's past, to see how it once upon a time responded successfully, and return it to an institutional position in which it can do so again. Where we can learn from Katrina and change the standard practice for the better is to emphasize providing communication and coordinating the speedy delivery of relief supplies. In both cases advance preparation is both simple and relatively cheap. If we follow the advice of those who would ignore the past effectiveness of FEMA, we will be doing anything, and doing it wrong, rather than doing something right.

- *Galveston Hurricane: 8,000 (FEMA not yet in existence for Galveston in 1900 or for Hurricane Jean in Haiti)*
- *Andrew: 65 lives, \$25 billion (1992)(\$33.8 today)*
- *Charley/Frances/Ivan/Jean: 152 lives, \$49 billion (\$50 today)*
- *Charley: 34 lives, \$14 billion*
- *Frances: 38 lives, \$9 billion*
- *Ivan: 2 lives, \$12 billion*
- *Jean: 28 lives, \$6.5 billion (2000 lives in Haiti)*
- *Floyd (1999): 77 lives, 6.5 billion (\$7.4 today)*
- *Miss Flood: 48 lives, \$26 billion (\$34 today)*
- *Loma Prieta: 68 lives, \$8 billion (1989) (\$12.5 billion today)*
- *Northridge: 57 lives, \$40 billion (1994) (\$51 billion today)*
- *9/11 WTC: 2,752 lives, \$38 billion*
- *9/11 Others: 233 lives (390 by other counts)*

- *WTC bombings: 6 lives, \$1 billion*
- *Oklahoma City: 168 lives, >\$2 billion?*
- *Katrina: 1,000 lives, up to \$26 billion. (seems low, consider all the rebuilding)*

Concerns about a leadership vacuum are misplaced. It was misdirected leadership that created a bottleneck in relief efforts. A more fully decentralized system would have been effective.

There are two problems that are technologically irresolvable. The first is the unprecedented size of the disaster. The second problem is the potential for appointed officials to be selected on the basis of loyalty rather than ability. While the President should have appointed a more qualified person, there is no technical method of insuring qualified appointments.

So the focus should be on what can be improved, and this requires a reconsideration of agency structure and function. Merely implementing all of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations would be a futile gesture. Many have acted as though the 9/11 report and recommendation are gospel, and that Congress has a solemn duty to enact them. These people are unwilling to recognize that the Commission may not in fact have had god-like wisdom. In fact Congress has a duty to make its own determination as to the value of those recommendations.

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1 Government Accountability Office 2003. GAO-03-113, "Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Federal Emergency Management Agency"

2 Wilson, James Q. 1989. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why they Do It.* Basic Books.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent and nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems in the United States through education, research, training, and policy analysis. ISPU provides cutting-edge analysis and policy solutions through publications, public events, media commentary, and community outreach. Major areas of focus include domestic politics, social policy, the economy, health, education, the environment, and foreign policy. Since our inception in 2002, ISPU's research has worked to increase understanding of key public policy issues and how they impact various communities in the United States.

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