

CONCLUSION

The preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina should disturb all Americans. While the Select Committee believes all people involved, at all levels of government, were trying their best to save lives and ease suffering, their best just wasn't good enough.

In this report we have tried to tell the story of the inadequate preparation and response. We cover a lot of territory – from evacuations to medical care, communications to contracting. We hope our findings will prompt the changes needed to make all levels of government better prepared and better able to respond the next time.

The resolution that created the Select Committee charged us with compiling findings, not recommendations. But in reality that's a distinction without a difference. Moving from our findings to legislative, organizational, and policy changes need not be a long or difficult journey.

We are left scratching our heads at the range of inefficiency and ineffectiveness that characterized government behavior right before and after this storm. But passivity did the most damage. The failure of initiative cost lives, prolonged suffering, and left all Americans justifiably concerned our government is no better prepared to protect its people than it was before 9/11, even if we are.

How can we set up a system to protect against passivity? Why do we repeatedly seem out of synch during disasters? Why do we continually seem to be one disaster behind?

We have not found every fact nor contemplated all successes and failures. What we have done over four months is intensely focus on a three-week period, uncovering a multitude of problems. We have learned more than enough to instruct those who will now have to craft and execute changes for the future.

We leave it to readers to determine whether we have done a fair and thorough job, and whether we identified and supported findings in a way that will foster change. Some predicted we would place disproportionate blame on one person or another, or that we would give some others a pass. We hope it is clear we have done neither.

We have not sought to assign individual blame, though it is clear in our report that some were not up to the challenge that was Katrina. Rather, we have tried to tell the story of government's preparation for and response to a massive storm, and identify lessons learned.

Our interaction with the White House illustrates this point. Some insist the White House's failure to provide, for example, e-mails to and from the White House Chief of Staff means we have insufficient information to determine why government failed. That view exalts political curiosity over the practical realities of a serious investigation.

While our dealings with the White House proved frustrating and difficult, we ended up with more than enough information to determine what went wrong there, to form a picture of a White House that, like many entities, was overcome by the fog of war. There is a big difference between having enough information to find institutional fault, which we do, and having information to assign individual blame, which, in the case of the White House, in large part we do not.

It's the former that's important if the goal is to be better prepared the next time. This was not about some individual's failure of initiative. It was about organizational and societal failures of initiative. There was more than enough failure to go around:

- Tardy and ineffective execution of the National Response Plan.
- An under-trained and under-staffed Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- A Catastrophic Incident Annex that was never invoked, and doubt that it would have done the job anyway.
- A perplexing inability to learn from Hurricane Pam and other exercises.
- Levees not built to withstand the most severe hurricanes.
- An incomplete evacuation that led to deaths and tremendous suffering.
- A complete breakdown in communications that paralyzed command and control and made situational awareness murky at best.
- The failure of state and local officials to maintain law and order.
- Haphazard and incomplete emergency shelter and housing plans.
- An overwhelmed FEMA logistics and contracting system that could not support the effective provision of urgently needed supplies.

The Select Committee encountered shortcomings and challenges even among those response elements that went relatively well and saved many lives. The military performed an invaluable role once forces were deployed, but encountered coordination problems with FEMA, the National Guard, and state officials. State-to-state emergency aid compacts were critical in restoring law and order and accelerating relief supplies, but too many people remain unfamiliar with the process. Contributions from charitable groups were enormously helpful, but they too were overwhelmed by the size of the storm.

Many of our findings are mixed in nature. Evacuations of general populations, for example, went relatively well in all three states. But declarations of mandatory evacuations in metropolitan New Orleans came late or not at all, and that, coupled with the decision to shelter but not evacuate the remaining population prolonged suffering. We saw heroic examples of medical care and patient needs being met under dire circumstances. But too often the deployment of medical personnel was reactive, not proactive.

The Select Committee acknowledges it was often torn between sympathy and incredulity, compassion and criticism. On the one hand, we understood Katrina was so big and so devastating that death and chaos were inevitable. We understood that top federal, state, and local officials overlooked some steps and some needs in the hours and days after landfall because they were focused on saving lives. But on the other hand, a dispassionate review made it clear that even an extraordinary lack of situational awareness could not excuse many of the shortcomings and organizational inaction evident in the documents and communications the Select Committee reviewed.

Leadership requires decisions to be made even when based on flawed and incomplete information. Too often during the immediate response to Katrina, sparse or conflicting information was used as an excuse for inaction rather than an imperative to step in and fill an obvious vacuum. Information passed through the maze of departmental operations centers and ironically-named "coordinating" committees, losing timeliness and relevance as it was massaged and interpreted for internal audiences.

As a result, leaders became detached from the changing minute-to-minute realities of Katrina. Information translated into pre-cast bureaucratic jargon put more

than geographic distance between Washington and the Gulf coast. Summaries and situation reports describing the gross totals of relief supplies directed to affected areas did not say when or how or to whom those desperately needed supplies would be delivered. And apparently no one asked.

Communications aren't a problem when you're only talking to yourself.

The Select Committee believes too many leaders failed to lead. Top aides failed as well, primarily in mis-prioritizing their bosses' attention and action. Critical time was wasted on issues of no importance to disaster response, such as winning the blame game, waging a public relations battle, or debating the advantages of wardrobe choices.

We have spared our readers a rehashing of unflattering e-mails involving Michael Brown and Governor Blanco and others, as they have been given more than enough attention by the media. We will pause only briefly here to urge future responders to make people, not politics, their priority.

We further urge public officials confronting the next Katrina to remember disaster response must be based on knowledge, not rumors. Government at all levels lost credibility due to inaccurate or unsubstantiated public statements made by officials regarding law and order, levee breaches, and overall response efforts.

The media must share some of the blame here. The Select Committee agrees the media can and should help serve as the public's "first informer" after disasters. In the 21st century, Americans depend on timely and accurate reporting, especially during times of crisis. But it's clear accurate reporting was among Katrina's many victims. If anyone rioted, it was the media. Many stories of rape, murder, and general lawlessness were at best unsubstantiated, at worst simply false. And that's too bad, because this storm needed no exaggeration.

As discussed in our report, widely-distributed uncorroborated rumors caused resources to be deployed, and important time and energy wasted, chasing down the imaginary. Already traumatized people in the Superdome and elsewhere, listening to their transistor radios, were further panicked.

"The sensational accounts delayed rescue and evacuation efforts already hampered by poor planning and a lack of coordination among local, state, and federal

agencies. People rushing to the Gulf coast to fly rescue helicopters or to distribute food, water and other aid steeled themselves for battle. In communities near and far, the seeds were planted that the victims of Katrina should be kept away, or at least handled with extreme caution," the *Washington Post* reported on October 5.¹

Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum told the Select Committee on October 27, "We focused assets and resources based on situational awareness provided to us by the media, frankly. And the media failed in their responsibility to get it right. ...we sent forces and capabilities to places that didn't need to go there in numbers that were far in excess of what was required, because they kept running the same B roll over and over....and the impression to us that were watching it was that the condition did not change. But the conditions were continually changing."²

E-mails obtained by the Select Committee reinforce the conclusion that top military officials were relying on news reports for information – information used to plan and deploy resources.³

The Select Committee does not mean to suggest the media is solely responsible for responders' lack of situational awareness, or the destruction of communications infrastructure that thrust television into the role of first informer for the military as well as the general public. Nor is the media solely responsible for reporting comments from sources they believed to be credible – especially top officials.

The Select Committee does, however, believe such circumstances make accurate reporting, especially in the period immediately after the storm, all the more important. Skepticism and fact-checking are easier when the sea is calm, but more vital when it is not.

As with so many other failures related to Katrina, what's most vexing is that emergency managers should have known such problems would arise among the chaos. Dr. Kathleen Tierney, head of the University of Colorado-Boulder Natural Hazards Center, told Select Committee staff that misleading or completely false media reports should have been among the most foreseeable elements of Katrina. "It's a well-documented element of disaster response," she said. "What you do has to be based on knowledge, not rumor, and you're going to be faced with a lot of rumors."⁴

Benigno Aguirre, sociology professor at the University of Delaware Disaster Research Center, told the *Philadelphia*

Inquirer, "It's discouraging for those who spend their lives studying disaster behavior that journalists so often get it wrong."⁵

Former FEMA Director Michael Brown told the Select Committee one of his biggest failures was failing to properly utilize the media as first informer.

"I failed initially to set up a series of regular briefings to the media about what FEMA was doing throughout the Gulf coast region," Brown said at the Select Committee's September 27 hearing. "Instead, I became tied to the news shows, going on the news shows early in the morning and late at night, and that was just a mistake. We should have been feeding that information to the press...in the manner and time that we wanted to, instead of letting the press drive us."⁶

Finally, a word about public communications. Both the message and the messengers were ineffective before and after Katrina. Messages to the public were uncoordinated and often confusing, leaving important questions unanswered. Federal, state, and local officials did not have a unified strategy for communicating with the public.

Risk communication is a well-researched field of study. There are accepted core principles for successfully communicating risks to the public. Information about threats should be consistent, accurate, clear, and provided repeatedly through multiple methods. It should be timely. It should be specific about the potential threat. It needs to get to people regardless of their level of access to information.

The Select Committee heard loud and clear from Gulf coast residents that the dangers of the coming hurricane could have been presented in a more effective manner, an issue which also carried racial and socioeconomic implications. If people don't hear a message from someone they trust, they will be skeptical.

Doreen Keeler, a New Orleans resident who evacuated before Mayor Nagin called for a mandatory evacuation, told the Select Committee local officials should have called for mandatory evacuations earlier, noting how difficult it was to convince the elderly residents of New Orleans to leave.⁷ "If a mandatory evacuation would have been called earlier," she said, "it would have been easier to move seniors out of the area and many lives would have been saved. It took me almost 24 hours to get my in-laws to leave. Others tell the same story. The severity of the storm was not stressed by elected officials."⁸

The relevant “elected officials,” we are sure, would contest that. In fact they did, in testimony before the Select Committee. But it’s the public perception of what was stressed that’s important here. The failure of initiative was also a failure of empathy, a myopia to the need to reach more people on their own terms.

Four and half years after 9/11, Americans deserve more than the state of nature after disaster strikes. With this report we have tried to identify where and why chaos ensued, so that even a storm the size of Katrina can be met with more order, more urgency, more coordination, and more initiative. ■

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- 1 Robert E. Pierre and Ann Gerhart, *News of Pandemonium May Have Slowed Aid*, WASHINGTON POST, Oct. 5, 2005 at A8.
 - 2 *Hearing on Hurricane Katrina: Preparedness And Response By The Department Of Defense, The Coast Guard, And The National Guard Of Louisiana, Mississippi And Alabama Before the Select Comm.*, 109th Congress (Oct. 27, 2005), (statement of Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum, Chief, Nat’l Guard Bureau).
 - 3 See e.g., E-mail correspondence from 1A JOC Watch Battle Captain to Lt. General Russel Honoré (Aug. 29, 2005).
 - 4 Interview by Select Comm. Staff with Kathleen J. Tierney, Director, Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, Institute of Behavioral Science, U. of Colorado at Boulder (Oct. 6, 2005).
 - 5 Beth Gillin, *Katrina Spawned rumors; media ran with them*, THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, Sept. 28, 2005 at A2.
 - 6 *Hearing On Hurricane Katrina: The Role Of The Federal Emergency Management Agency Before the Select Comm.*, 109th Congress (Sept. 27, 2005), (statement of Michael D. Brown, former Undersecretary of Emergency Preparedness and Response, DHS).
 - 7 *Hearing on Hurricane Katrina: Voices from Inside the Storm Before Select Comm.*, 109th Congress, (Dec. 6, 2005) (written statement of Doreen Keeler Tomlinson, resident of New Orleans, LA).
 - 8 *Id.*