

**Hurricane Katrina: The Defense Department's Role in the Response**  
**Senator Joe Lieberman**  
**February 9, 2005**

Thanks Madame Chairman. Today's hearing – our 17<sup>th</sup> in the Committee's investigation – offers us an opportunity to examine a critical question about what role do we want our military to have in dealing with the most catastrophic of national disasters – whether natural or inflicted by terrorists. The answer to that question has both practical and constitutional implications.

Despite its designation as a supporting agency under the National Response Plan, the Defense Department's preparations and initial response to Hurricane Katrina were unfortunately as passive as most other federal agencies. But when the military did engage, it engaged with full force and great effectiveness. It took on the responsibilities of many other agencies at different levels of our government. By Thursday of the week of landfall, FEMA essentially turned over its logistical obligations to the military, resulting in a \$1 billion mission assignment, the largest in the history of FEMA mission assignments.

I frequently say that the United States has the best military in the history of the world – because of the men and women who comprise it, but also because we invest in them and it. In the days after Hurricane Katrina, we are reminded again and again of the wisdom of this investment. The military's contribution to the rescue of the communities along the Gulf Coast that were hit by Katrina is yet another testament to the fact that we not only have extraordinary men and women serving in the military but the Defense Department alone has the best communications equipment, the logistical ability, the helicopters, the planes, the boats, the medical teams, and other resources necessary to respond to a catastrophe. The question is when and how we use those assets.

Today, we will hear from two panels of witnesses, the senior uniformed officers who led the operations on the ground in Louisiana and New Orleans and the top civilians and uniformed officers who set the policies and implemented the full military response.

With a few individual exceptions, the Pentagon's preparations for this cataclysmic storm in the days before landfall were slow and unsure. Situational awareness was poor, and the Pentagon was hesitant to move necessary assets unless they were requested. Our military is superb at planning for different threat situations. But it appears that the Pentagon did not do much planning in advance of Katrina to anticipate the challenges of an "incident of national significance" as defined under the National Response Plan.

On Tuesday of Katrina's week one, the military recognized that the rescue of the Gulf Coast was uncertain and foundering under the administration of the Department of Homeland Security. We are especially indebted to Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England, who, because he was watching Katrina's impact on television, concluded that

troops and equipment needed to be deployed immediately without the normal paperwork. We also thank Lt. General Blum for orchestrating the deployment of thousands of National Guard troops to the Gulf Coast; and to Admiral Keating for ordering the deployment of 22,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and the materiel to support them.

We are also indebted to the men and women in the trenches. Under the most difficult of circumstance, Major General Landreneau ably led the Louisiana and other National Guard troops, which swelled from a force of 5,000 to an eventual force of 30,000 literally from every state in the union. Lt. General Honore is from Louisiana and had experienced the 2004 hurricane season. As Katrina approached, he was at his command in Atlanta, he followed the weather forecast. He asked the Pentagon to identify equipment and assets he knew he would need. He went to Louisiana and he filled a large and visible leadership role when he arrived in New Orleans. Mayor Nagin likened him to John Wayne. General Honore's conduct is a model of what the public seeks from a leader in a time of crisis. His forceful and decisive manner reassured all who saw him, as a city plunged deeper and deeper into crisis. He took command of the active duty troops and bridged the gap between them and the Guard.

But the power of your personality, General Honore, also highlights the critical constitutional issues at stake here: How much authority should the Title X, regular military have in domestic affairs? We've heard much of Posse Comitatus. And this country has a strong aversion to military control in civilian settings. These are difficult questions that must be studied in a thoughtful manner, and resolved in advance, not in the heat of crisis, as appears to have happened here.

As we learned from Governors Blanco and Barbour last week, when disaster strikes a state, no governor will willingly cede authority over their National Guard to the federal government. But what if there is a catastrophe so great that the National Guard is as overwhelmed as the New Orleans police and firefighters were? What if, God Forbid, the disaster is an unexpected terrorist attack, without the warning the weather experts gave us about Hurricane Katrina. Is federalization then necessary, to bring all the resources of the military to bear? Katrina showed us that we need to define where that line is drawn.

Governor Blanco told us of the extreme pressure she felt from the White House to federalize her National Guard troops. She said she thought the pressure resulted from political considerations rather than military ones, calling it, and I quote here, "posturing instead of a real solution." End quote. I hope Lt. General Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, can help us better understand what happened and why.

Katrina also revealed some uncertainties and tensions between the Pentagon and NORTHCOM and the National Guard Bureau regarding the military's role in domestic crises. Our Committee has learned through interviews and documents of some disagreements about the degree to which the Defense Department should operate on U.S. soil. And these disagreements may have limited the military's response time and effectiveness in this case because of the initial hesitation to deploy active duty troops and to pre-position assets before Hurricane Katrina made landfall.

Once again, the fictional Hurricane Pam exercise made clear that local and state resources would be immediately overwhelmed by a Category 3 or higher storm, which Katrina was. The National Response Plan was in place to guide all federal agencies in the event of such a catastrophe. But instead of using the NRP to address in advance these

matters related to a catastrophic event, resolve bureaucratic differences, and construct a comprehensive action plan, the federal government appeared to be operating on the fly, and the roles of the military – National Guard and active duty – appear to have been part of a response that was cobbled together as the week went on. However successful the execution proved to be later, that is no way to manage a crisis of this magnitude. It is not what we envisioned with the creation of the Homeland Security Department. In the end, the lack of a plan led to unnecessary confusion, unnecessary bureaucratic struggles, and more human suffering than should have been. This hearing must help us resolve these questions so that we do better the next time, when we may not have advance notice of the coming catastrophe.

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