

Hurricane Katrina: The Role of the Governors in Managing a Catastrophe
Senator Joe Lieberman
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Thank you, Madam Chairman, and welcome to you, Governor Blanco and Governor Barbour. We are fortunate to have you with us today to hear your views on the failures -- and occasional successes -- in the preparations for and response to Hurricane Katrina by all levels of government.

As you know, Senator Collins and I, and other members of the Committee, have visited your beleaguered states twice since Hurricane Katrina struck. The wreckage must be seen to be believed. Words cannot quite capture the annihilation not just of property, but of entire cultures. We visited a week after the storm and then again last month, and unfortunately, Senator Collins and I both felt that the recovery process was not proceeding as quickly as it should. So we need to make sure that you both have what you need to bring your ruined communities back to life.

Today, your testimony will cap a series of hearings we've held this week about how the local, state, and federal governments interacted - or didn't interact, as the case may be - to carry out critical functions such as urban search and rescue, pre- and post-storm evacuation, care of the sick and the needy, maintaining law and order, and more.

You are both chief executives of sovereign governments within this great nation, and I applaud you both for the extensive cooperation you have provided this committee.

Madame Chairman, it is worth noting that the cooperation these state chief executives and their staffs have provided stands in marked contrast to the recalcitrance of the White House.

Frankly, the list of questions this Committee needs to ask senior White House officials continues to grow. Some of those questions arise from the pressure that we have learned the White House applied to Governor Blanco and her staff to accept the federalization of National Guard troops. This is an important subject and I intend to ask Governor Blanco to describe her conversations with President Bush and his top aide.

As we have been reminded all week, much of what befell southeast Louisiana last August was predicted by the fictional Hurricane Pam exercise. Many of Pam's predictions of devastation also played out 100 miles up the coast into Mississippi where 11 towns were shredded by a 30-foot high storm surge.

While Pam demonstrated the need for a bigger, faster and more comprehensive response from the federal government during a catastrophic hurricane, it is also true that Pam alerted Louisiana officials to the steps they needed to take. Governor Blanco, I look forward to your response to the criticism that Louisiana failed to implement Pam's most important recommendations.

For example, with a catastrophic hurricane bearing down on New Orleans, the authorities in Louisiana appear to have seriously underestimated the number of National

Guard troops that would be needed after the storm passed.

Here's another example: At a July 2005 Hurricane Pam workshop, local, state, and federal officials agreed that in the event of a catastrophic hurricane, they needed to pre stage 600 buses and 1,200 drivers 50 hours before landfall the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Planning did not act on this recommendation and the consequences were apparent.

Our investigators have identified some of the same failures of federal planning, preparedness, and response in Governor Barbour's state that we know contributed to the suffering Louisiana. From the start, FEMA's response in Mississippi was poorly managed and executed, and could not deliver in a timely manner the basic life-support that Mississippi emergency management officials were counting on.

More than a week after Katrina passed, some of the hardest hit communities in Mississippi were not receiving sufficient food, water, generators, or medical care. State and local officials interviewed by our staff described efforts to prod FEMA to improve the flow of commodities and reported that local FEMA representatives were also frustrated by the kinks in the federal supply line.

The Committee has also learned that in response to these delays, authorities in Mississippi improvised - either by buying commodities directly from private vendors or by obtaining food stored in military warehouses. When authorities in Florida learned of

the problems in Mississippi, they sent some of the supplies they had pre-staged for Katrina. . The evidence shows that FEMA officials knew – and the Department of Homeland Security should have known - that a catastrophic hurricane would immediately overwhelm local and state agencies. Nevertheless Katrina was treated as a normal hurricane.

At this juncture, the Committee work raises important questions about the failures of government at all levels. The Committee will continue to identify these failures as it seeks to determine the causes and consequences of what occurred before and after Katrina so that that the next time a catastrophic hurricane hits an American city our local, state and federal agencies are better prepared to respond.