

## PREFACE

On September 15, 2005, the House of Representatives approved H. Res. 437, which created the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina (“the Select Committee”).

According to the resolution, the Committee was charged with conducting “a full and complete investigation and study and to report its findings to the House not later than February 15, 2006, regarding— (1) the development, coordination, and execution by local, State, and Federal authorities of emergency response plans and other activities in preparation for Hurricane Katrina; and (2) the local, State, and Federal government response to Hurricane Katrina.”

The Committee presents the report narrative and the findings that stem from it to the U.S. House of Representatives and the American people for their consideration. Members of the Select Committee agree unanimously with the report and its findings. Other Members of Congress who participated in the Select Committee’s hearings and investigation but were not official members of the Select Committee, while concurring with a majority of the report’s findings, have presented additional views as well, which we offer herein on their behalf.

First and foremost, this report is issued with our continued thoughts and prayers for Katrina’s victims. Their families. Their friends. The loss of life, of property, of livelihoods and dreams has been enormous. And we salute all Americans who have stepped up to the plate to help in any way they can.

---

It has been said civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. With Katrina, we have had the catastrophe, and we are racing inexorably toward the next. Americans want to know: what have we learned?

Two months before the Committee was established, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich testified before a Government Reform subcommittee about the need to move the government to an “entrepreneurial” model and away from its current “bureaucratic” model, so that we can get government to move with Information Age speed and effectiveness.

“Implementing policy effectively,” Speaker Gingrich said, “is ultimately as important as *making* the right policy.”

The Select Committee first convened on September 22, 2005, understanding, like Speaker Gingrich, that a policy that cannot be implemented effectively is no policy at all.

The Select Committee was created because, in the tragic aftermath of Katrina, America was again confronted with the vast divide between policy creation and policy implementation. With the life-and-death difference between theory and practice.

The Select Committee has spent much of the past five months examining the aftermath of this catastrophic disaster. It has become increasingly clear that local, state, and federal government agencies failed to meet the needs of the residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. It has been our job to figure out why, and to make sure we are better prepared for the future.

Our mandate was clear: gather facts about the preparation for and response to Katrina, at all levels of government.

Investigate aggressively, follow the facts wherever they may lead, and find out what went right and what went wrong. Ask why coordination and information sharing between local, state, and federal governments was so dismal.

- Why situational awareness was so foggy, for so long.
- Why *all* residents, especially the most helpless, were not evacuated more quickly.
- Why supplies and equipment and support were so slow in arriving.
- Why so much taxpayer money aimed at better preparing and protecting the Gulf coast was left on the table, unspent or, in some cases, misspent.
- Why the adequacy of preparation and response seemed to vary significantly from state to state, county to county, town to town.
- Why unsubstantiated rumors and uncritically repeated press reports – at times fueled by top officials – were able to delay, disrupt, and diminish the response.
- And why government at all levels failed to react more effectively to a storm that was predicted with unprecedented timeliness and accuracy.

We agreed early on that the task before us was too important for carping. This was not about politics. Katrina did not distinguish between Republicans and Democrats.

This was about getting the information we need to chart a new and better course for emergency preparation and response. The American people want the facts, and they've been watching. They alone will judge whether our review has been thorough and fair. Our final exam is this report.

Our report marks the culmination of 9 public hearings, scores of interviews and briefings, and the review of more than 500,000 pages of documents.

Our investigation revealed that Katrina was a national failure, an abdication of the most solemn obligation to provide for the common welfare. At every level – individual, corporate, philanthropic, and governmental – we failed to meet the challenge that was Katrina. In this cautionary tale, all the little pigs built houses of straw.

Of all we found along the timeline running from the fictional Hurricane Pam to the tragically real devastation along the Gulf coast, this conclusion stands out: A National Response Plan is not enough.

What's needed is a National Action Plan. Not a plan that says Washington will do everything, but one that says, when all else fails, the federal government must do something, whether it's formally requested or not. Not even the perfect bureaucratic storm of flaws and failures can wash away the fundamental governmental responsibility to protect public health and safety.

Still, no political storm surge from Katrina should be allowed to breach the sovereign boundaries between localities, states, and the federal government. Our system of federalism wisely relies on those closest to the people to meet immediate needs. But faith in federalism alone cannot sanctify a dysfunctional system in which DHS and FEMA simply wait for requests for aid that state and local officials may be unable or unwilling to convey. In this instance, blinding lack of situational awareness and disjointed decision making needlessly compounded and prolonged Katrina's horror.

In many respects, our report is a litany of mistakes, misjudgments, lapses, and absurdities all cascading together, blinding us to what was coming and hobbling any collective effort to respond.

This is not to say there were not many, many heroes, or that some aspects of the preparation and response were not, by any standard, successful. We found many examples of astounding individual initiative that saved lives and stand in stark contrast to the larger institutional failures. Nor do we mean to focus on assigning individual blame. Obtaining a full accounting and identifying lessons learned does not require finger pointing, instinctively tempting as that may be.

There was also an element of simple bad luck with Katrina that aggravated the inadequate response. The hurricane arrived over a weekend, at the end of the month. People on fixed incomes had little money for gas or food or lodging, making them more likely to remain in place and wait for their next check. Communicating via television or radio with families enmeshed in their weekend routines was difficult at best, as was finding drivers and other needed volunteers.

Over the past several months, we have become more than familiar with the disaster declaration process outlined in the Stafford Act. We understand the goals, structure and mechanisms of the National Response Plan. We've digested the alphabet soup of "coordinating elements" established by the Plan: the HSOC (Homeland Security Operations Center) and RRCC (Regional Response Coordination Center); JFOs (Joint Field Offices) and PFOs (Principal Federal Officials); the IIMG (Interagency Incident Management Group); and much more.

But the American people don't care about acronyms or organizational charts. They want to know who was supposed to do what, when, and whether the job got done. And if it didn't get done, they want to know how we are going to make sure it does the next time.

This report is a story about the National Response Plan, and how its 15 Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) were implemented with Katrina. We offer details on how well the ESFs were followed. Where there were problems, we've asked why. Where even flawless execution led to unacceptable results, we've returned to questioning the underlying plan.

We should be clear about the limitations of our investigation and the parameters of this report. We focused on the preparation for and response to Katrina, for the most part paring down the timeline to one week before and two weeks after the storm. We did not, at

least intentionally, delve into important, longer-term rebuilding and recovery issues that will continue to have a central place on the congressional agenda for months and years to come. In many areas — housing, education, health, contracting — “response” bleeds into “recovery,” and the distinctions we’ve made are admittedly difficult and somewhat arbitrary.

Further, this report is only a summary of our work. We are hopeful that – indeed, certain that – more information will arise. The Select Committee has constrained its narrative and findings to those that can shed the most light, make the biggest difference, and trigger the most obvious near-term actions. Readers will note that we focus considerable attention on a handful of “key events” – evacuation plans and the execution of them; conditions and events at the Superdome, Convention Center, and highways; nursing homes and hospitals – as a means of illustrating what went right and wrong in countless other locales.

What this Select Committee has done is not rocket science.

We’ve gathered facts and established timelines based on some fairly rudimentary but important questions posed to the right people in both the public and private sectors.

- What did you need and what did you get?
- Where were you in the days and hours right before, during, and after the storm?
- Who were you talking to?
- What were you doing?
- Does that match what you were *supposed* to be doing? Why or why not?

In other words, the Select Committee has matched what was *supposed* to happen under federal, state, and local plans against what *actually* happened.

Our findings emerged from this process of matching.

Too often there were too many cooks in the kitchen, and because of that the response to Katrina was at times overdone, at times underdone. Too often, because everybody was in charge, nobody was in charge.

Many government officials continue to stubbornly resist recognizing that fundamental changes in disaster management are needed. This report illustrates that we

have to stop waiting for the disaster that fits our response plan and instead design a scalable capacity to meet whatever Mother Nature throws at us. It’s not enough to say, “We wouldn’t be here if the levees had not failed.” The levees *did* fail, and government and other organizations failed in turn – in many, many ways.

It remains difficult to understand how government could respond so ineffectively to a disaster that was anticipated for years, and for which specific dire warnings had been issued for days. This crisis was not only predictable, it was predicted.

If this is what happens when we have advance warning, we shudder to imagine the consequences when we do not. Four and a half years after 9/11, America is still not ready for prime time.

This is particularly distressing because we know we remain at risk for terrorist attacks, and because the 2006 hurricane season is right around the corner. With this report we hope to do our part to enhance preparation and response.

With Katrina, there was no shortage of plans. There were plans, but there was not enough plan-*ning*.

Government failed because it did not learn from past experiences, or because lessons thought to be learned were somehow not implemented. **If 9/11 was a failure of imagination, then Katrina was a failure of initiative. It was a failure of leadership.**

Tom Davis  
Harold Rogers  
Christopher Shays  
Henry Bonilla  
Steve Buyer  
Sue Myrick  
Mac Thornberry  
Kay Granger  
Charles W. “Chip” Pickering  
Bill Shuster  
Jeff Miller



FEMA