

Opening Statement

Ranking Member Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN)

Full Committee Hearing: *NOAA Hurricane Forecasting*
October 7, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This hearing today is vitally important. We've recently been reminded of both the power of weather and weather prediction, and I look forward to exploring these topics.

Over the years, we've spent billions of dollars on the Weather Service to improve our capacity to predict the weather. We do it not simply because it is good science, but because we can save lives if we provide accurate warnings of severe weather events.

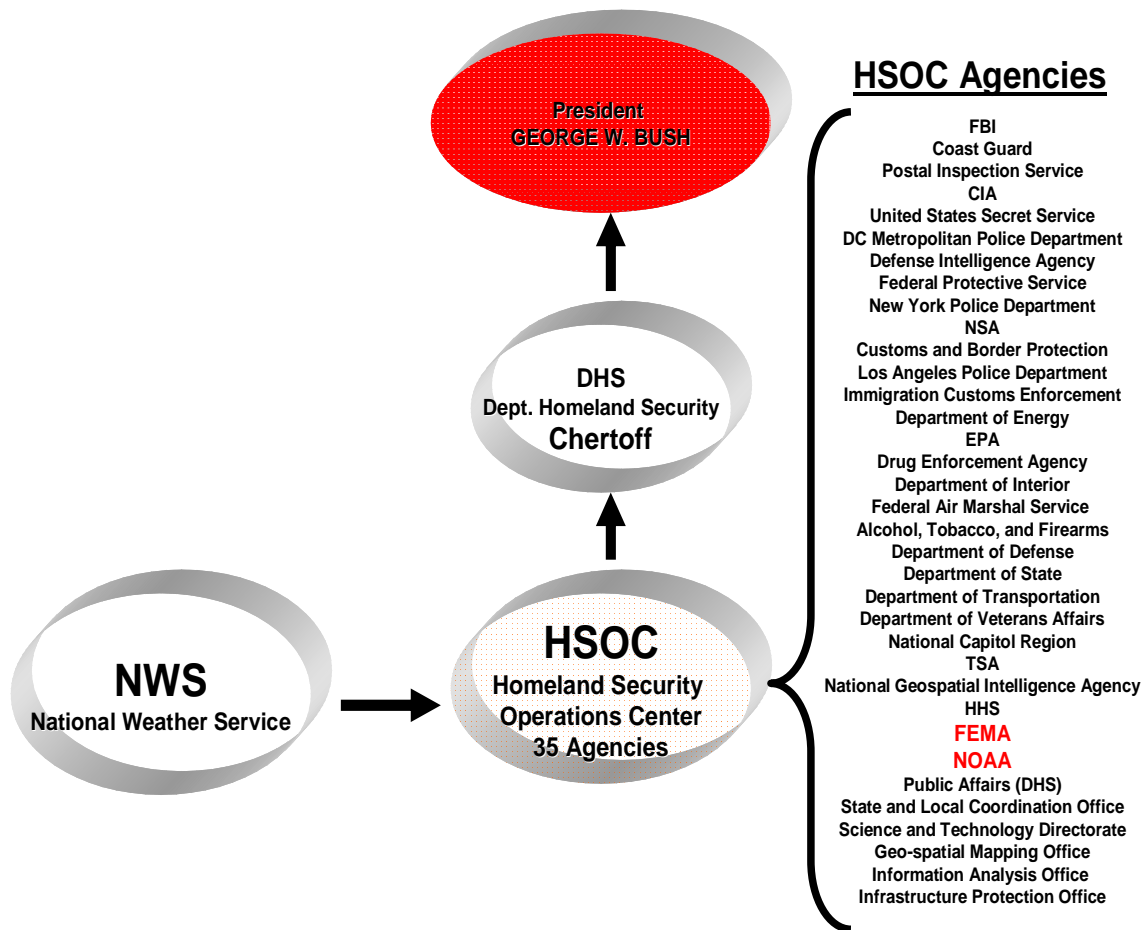
We have also spent hundreds of billions of dollars on homeland security. We do it to enhance our capacity to stop terrorist attacks and to mobilize our nation's forces in cases of catastrophic incidents - whether by terrorism or by natural disaster.

The goal in both sets of expenditures is to keep Americans secure and to come to their aid when they most need it.

In the last few weeks, one of these systems worked and one of these systems failed. And failure has consequences - in this case some of those who died, and we do not yet know how many, they died because the Federal Government did not get there in time. As Walter Maestri, the emergency management chief for Louisiana's Jefferson Parish put it: "the cavalry didn't arrive."

The information regarding the power of Hurricane Katrina went right to the top. One of our witnesses here today conducted briefings that included the President, Secretary Chertoff and Undersecretary Brown.

The other witness heads an agency which has placed an employee inside the nerve center for the Federal government's response to catastrophes: the Homeland Security Operations Center (HSOC).



As the graphic on the screen demonstrates, Secretary Chertoff is the head of that center and information is supposed to flow up to the Secretary from its work and also to the President.

So the information from the Weather Service was flowing to our emergency response leaders through two paths and yet our government seemed taken by surprise.

FEMA head Michael Brown said on CNN on August 31, "I must say, this storm is much bigger than anyone expected."

Is it possible that the Weather Service simply wasn't being articulate about the nature of the threat posed by Katrina? I don't think that to be true, but we will have a chance today to confirm it.

Apparently one of our witnesses didn't think it was true. Mr. Mayfield. According to a St. Petersburg (Florida) *Times* story on August 30, based on an interview with Max Mayfield:

“On Saturday night, Mayfield was so worried about Hurricane Katrina that he called the governors of Louisiana and Mississippi and the mayor of New Orleans. On Sunday, he even talked about the force of Katrina during a video conference call to President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.”

“I just wanted to be able to go to sleep that night knowing that I did all I could do,” Mayfield said.

On Sunday Mr. Mayfield conducted his regular presentation to the Hurricane Liaison Team/FEMA conference call. According to Mr. Mayfield's press account and government records the President, Secretary Chertoff and Undersecretary Brown were on calls either Saturday or Sunday and we know from other sources that the President and Chertoff both were on line for the August 28 briefing.



President George W. Bush is handed a map by Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin, center, during a video teleconference with federal and state emergency management organizations on Hurricane Katrina from his Crawford, Texas ranch on **Sunday August 28, 2005**. White House photo by Paul Morse.
CAPTION FROM THE WHITE HOUSE WEB SITE – www.whitehouse.gov.

On the screen is a photo released by the White House of the President participating in this video teleconference. On the screen in front of the President is Max Mayfield and over Mr. Mayfield's shoulder is an image of a powerful storm: Hurricane Katrina.

In an article printed in the September 4 *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans Mr. Mayfield said, reacting to the claims by some that the storm surprised them in its ferocity and consequences.

“We were briefing them way before landfall.... It’s not like this is a surprise. We had the advisories that the levee could be topped. I keep looking back to see if there was anything else we could have done, and I just don’t know what it would be.”

I hope in your testimony, Dr. Mayfield, you can address whether anything else has come to mind that you could have done to get the attention of our emergency response leaders.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.