



United States Senate
OFFICE OF THE MAJORITY LEADER
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20510

September 23, 2005

The Honorable Susan M. Collins
Chairman
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Collins:

As you are aware, I have been working to create a bipartisan select committee to investigate the failures in local, State and Federal preparation and response to Hurricane Katrina. I have made several proposals to Senator Reid in hopes that he might join in this effort. I regret that the Democratic leadership has blocked every attempt to launch a bipartisan, bicameral investigation of the breakdowns in the hurricane response and relief effort. It was my sincere hope that at this time of national need we could act – Republicans and Democrats alike – to get the answers the American people deserve and implement the changes needed to ensure their safety.

My initial proposal, drafted in conjunction with your staff, called for a bipartisan select committee made up of the members of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Everyone would agree that your committee has done the exceptional work and few can argue the determination and fairness that you and Senator Lieberman have exhibited in all of your workings together. That is why it is so perplexing that Senator Reid, for some unknown reason, took the view that he did not “believe [the] proposed select committee will conduct an independent, non-partisan investigation.”

I believe Congress’ Katrina investigation must be bipartisan and exceedingly thorough. I also firmly believe that the even-handed leadership demonstrated by you and Senator Lieberman give emphasis to the need for your committee to take on this most important task. So I put forward a modified proposal, suggesting that we pass a resolution simply directing your committee to investigate the Katrina response on behalf of the Senate. But again, the Democratic leadership inexplicably rejected this approach as well. Senator Reid questioned the ability of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee to meet the task at hand. Rather, he suggested that publicly elected members of Congress abandon their duties and instead outsource our long-standing oversight responsibilities to an unelected commission, even though this will take months to set up and possibly years to report back.

I could not disagree more. Government at all levels failed in its response to Hurricane Katrina. The American people need and deserve answers. The longer we wait to find out what

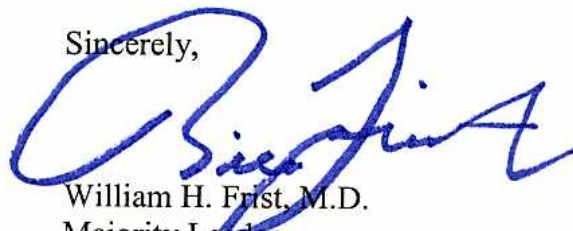
went wrong, the more lives that will be put at risk. Even today the news reports that a Category 5 hurricane, Hurricane Rita, is bearing down on the Gulf Coast. Moreover, I strongly believe that it is the duty and responsibility of Congress – our responsibility – to investigate what went wrong. Because it is Congress that has the responsibility to implement the changes needed to keep the American people safe and prevent this from ever happening again. Government has no graver responsibility than protecting the lives of American citizens. I am very disappointed in Senator Reid's steadfast refusal to support either the creation of a select committee or to allow the Senate to empower the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee to conduct a bipartisan investigation on the Senate's behalf.

Accordingly, I am renewing my request that your committee take the lead in investigating the development, coordination, and execution by local, state and Federal authorities of the nation's disaster preparedness as well as of emergency response plans in preparation for and efforts to respond to and recover from Hurricane Katrina. I would also ask, to the extent practicable, that you coordinate your investigations with the House Select Committee that is conducting a parallel investigation – especially with respect to those who are coming to Washington, D.C. from the Gulf Coast region where much work remains to be done. I understand that some of this may require a change to the Committee's rules. If this is the case, I would ask that those changes be made for purposes of this investigation. It is particularly important that we avoid duplicative and repetitive demands of those who are still assisting in the recovery process.

Finally, I pledge to you that I will continue to work with the Democratic leadership to see if we can reach some agreement on a more formal structure. The proposals I put forth were modeled on some of the most serious investigations that Congress has ever undertaken: the 1973 Watergate Committee, the 1987 Iran Contra Committee and the 1997 Campaign Finance investigation. I have the utmost confidence that you and Senator Lieberman, working together, will conduct a complete and comprehensive investigation that will get to the bottom of what went wrong so we can make the changes needed to keep all Americans safe.

In these challenging times our country expects its leaders to work together. The American people deserve our best effort and I believe you are in a position to meet the challenge ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bill Frist", written over the typed name below.

William H. Frist, M.D.
Majority Leader
United States Senate