

Additional Views

Senator Frank R. Lautenberg

1: On Establishing an Independent, Bi-Partisan Katrina Commission

I commend the efforts of Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Lieberman and their staffs in putting together a solid, thoughtful, and comprehensive report which chronicles in great and grave detail the failures of all levels of government in preparing for and responding to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding. I fully believe that the Chairman and the Ranking Member did the best they could, given the difficult political circumstances the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee faced during this seven-month investigation.

I say that the Committee labored under difficult circumstances because the Administration refused to cooperate fully. On page 13 of his dissenting views, Senator Lieberman stated that the “worst offender ... that should have stood above the fray and worked hardest with the Committee to uncover the government’s failings in Katrina: the White House.”¹ Senator Lieberman added that “not once in his Senate career of nearly 18 years has he engaged a White House less willing to cooperate with a Senate investigation.” The Committee investigation was the best it could have been given White House intransigence, but what is required now is an independent, bi-partisan Katrina Commission with subpoena power.

We all know that the Administration repeatedly failed – or refused – to cooperate with the Committee’s Katrina investigation, even after assurances by President Bush in September 2005 to “work with members of both parties to make sure this effort is thorough.”² In fact, the White House became an obstacle to this Committee’s investigation by not producing large quantities of information or witnesses the Committee requested. The White House opposed Committee efforts to interview their personnel and interfered with the Committee’s ability to get much-needed information from other federal agencies regarding White House actions vis-à-vis Hurricane Katrina. Again, in his additional views, Senator Lieberman explicitly stated that:

The Committee’s efforts to understand the role the White House played in events leading up to and following the catastrophe were severely hindered by the White House’s failure to comply with the Committee requests for information, documents, and interviews. As a result, we learned much too little about what the White House and the Executive Office of the President were doing during the critical days before and after Katrina struck.³

For these reasons, I strongly believe and recommend that an independent commission – with subpoena power – should be established immediately to investigate the federal, state, and local government preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. I concur with Senator Lieberman that:

The one thing we do know is that because we were denied the opportunity to fully explore the role the White House played in preparing for and responding to Katrina, we have little insight into how the President and his staff monitored, managed, and directed the government’s disaster preparedness in the post-9/11 world, how they coordinated the rest of the federal bureaucracy in response to Katrina. ... Without this information, the Committee’s investigation necessarily lacked the ability to fully and fairly analyze and assess a critical element of the response to Katrina.⁴

Although Senator Lieberman does not concur with my view that an independent Katrina Commission should be established without further delay, his dissenting views eloquently make the best arguments for its creation.

From the beginning of this investigation, I – along with Senator Clinton and others – called for the creation of a Katrina Commission that would be bi-partisan, modeled very closely after the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the so-called 9/11 Commission), which was so successful. This commission would be charged with examining the federal, state, and local responses to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Region of the United States, specifically in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and other affected areas. The Commission would then make recommendations on immediate corrective measures to improve preparedness for and responses to future disasters.

The Katrina Commission would be modeled very closely after the 9/11 Commission, but would place its primary emphasis on emergency-services preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery. The President would appoint the Chair, and the remaining members would be appointed by the Republican and Democrat leadership of the House and Senate with no more than five individuals from the same political party. The Commission would report on its findings within six months of its establishment. The Commission would begin its work as soon as practicable.

This independent approach of the 9/11 Commission served this nation well in the aftermath of the worst terrorist attack upon the United States and will serve the nation well in the aftermath of one of the worst natural disasters to strike the United States.

The many findings and 88 recommendations in the Committee's Katrina Report are very useful, but Americans want and deserve more. The government failed its citizens before, during, and after this disaster. Let's not fail the American people again by denying them access to what the White House knew and when they knew it. Let's listen to them, and appoint an independent, bi-partisan Katrina Commission to complete an investigation into what went wrong and why.

2: On the Need to Account for People with Pets in Emergency Planning

One of the many disturbing and heart-rending developments we saw unfold after Hurricane Katrina was the peril many people found themselves in because they could not bear to evacuate without their pets, and the anguish of those people who were forced to leave their pets behind.

There was much media coverage, both in print and on television, of distraught pet owners and of abandoned animals going hungry, thirsty, and full of fear as their world was washed away. Millions of people heard or saw the distressing story of one young boy who was so traumatized after his dog was taken from him when he boarded a bus to leave the Superdome that he became physically ill. One distraught woman reportedly offered her wedding ring to a shelter aide if he would find out what had happened to her dog, which she was not allowed to bring inside with her.

The evidence suggests that the attachment people have to their pets was a key reason why many decided not to evacuate. According to a recent survey of people affected by Hurricane Katrina who were living in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama, 44 percent of those who did not evacuate by choice (as opposed to those who lacked the means to do so), did not leave in part because they weren't willing to abandon their pets.⁵

These were life-and-death decisions, and for some of these people, the decision to stay with their pets cost them their lives. The Mississippi *Sun-Herald* recently identified seven individuals who died during or after Hurricane Katrina because they did not want to leave a beloved pet, and so they stayed in harm's way.⁶

Moreover, some of the animals left behind, agitated by hunger, thirst, and fear, presented threats to the rescue and response personnel who went door-to-door looking for survivors.

As with other aspects of the disjointed and incomplete preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, there was no plan in place to help people with pets evacuate, or to ensure there were adequate shelters that could accommodate people and their pets.

I agree with the Committee Report's finding that the needs of those with pets and service animals should be a factor in emergency planning for evacuations and sheltering. While I support the Committee's recommendation that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should encourage individuals as well as state and local governments to plan for evacuating and sheltering pets, I also think it is important that we do more to address this issue. To that end, I joined Senator Stevens in introducing the "Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act," S. 2548.

Our bill would require state and local emergency-preparedness plans to take into account the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals. In addition, our bill would authorize the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide technical assistance in developing these plans and financial assistance for purchasing, constructing, leasing, or renovating emergency shelter facilities that can accommodate people with pets and service animals. Finally, our bill would include people with pets and service animals among those for whom FEMA may provide essential assistance in response to a major disaster.

I hope that our bill will be included as part of any legislation that this Committee develops in response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

In addition, I am concerned by reports that despite FEMA's deployment of more than 200 veterinarians to assist in the Gulf Coast – the largest simultaneous deployment of veterinary relief in U.S. history – the veterinary teams were ill-equipped because of FEMA policies. Apparently, FEMA prohibits veterinarians from using their own equipment, accepting donations, or buying supplies. As a result, Veterinary Medical Assistance Teams (VMATs) – which are identified in the National Response Plan as the source of federal veterinary medical treatment during an emergency – did not have what they needed to carry out their mission.⁷

I believe the Committee should work with FEMA, DHS, and other interested parties to address problems like this to ensure that, like the rest of FEMA, VMATs will be appropriately staffed, equipped, and otherwise prepared to fulfill their role within the National Response Plan.

Conclusion

It is important to note that what happened in the Gulf Coast could happen anywhere in the United States the next time disaster strikes. According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Americans currently have over 358 million pets. Sixty-three percent of all American households have one or more pets. So wherever a natural or manmade disaster could occur, many of the people who would be affected will be pet owners – 61 percent of

whom told national pollsters they would refuse to evacuate ahead of a disaster if they could not take their pets with them.⁸

One of the most important lessons to be learned from Hurricane Katrina is that planning and preparedness are essential to avoid aggravating whatever disasters may strike in the future. By accounting for the very strong ties that millions of Americans have to their pets in preparing for future emergencies, we can ensure a better response and actually save lives. As HSUS executive vice president Michael Markarian has said, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath “made people recognize that helping pets during a disaster is helping people during a disaster.”

1 See, in this Report, Additional Views of Senators Lieberman, Levin, Akaka, Carper, Lautenberg and Pryor on White House Katrina Failures, Administration Lack of Cooperation with the Investigation, and Failure to Establish Unified Command.

2 Speech, President George W. Bush, Jackson Square, New Orleans, LA, Sept. 15, 2005.

3 See, in this Report, Additional Views of Senators Lieberman, Levin, Akaka, Carper, Lautenberg and Pryor on White House Katrina Failures, Administration Lack of Cooperation with the Investigation, and Failure to Establish Unified Command.

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5 Fritz Institute, “Hurricane Katrina: Perceptions of the Affected,” Apr. 26, 2006.

6 Karen Nelson, “Staying with animals in Katrina was a deadly choice for some, and the hurricane left other owners seeking shelter from the storm,” SunHerald.com, posted Apr. 30, 2006. <http://www.sunherald.com/mld/sunherald/news/local/14464093.htm>.

7 William Wan, “A Lesson from Katrina: Pets Matter,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 2, 2006.

8 <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1029>.