

ADDITIONAL VIEWS SUBMITTED BY THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON BEHALF OF REPRESENTATIVE CHARLIE MELANCON AND REPRESENTATIVE WILLIAM JEFFERSON

Michael Brown appeared before the Select Committee on February 11, 2006. His testimony, while self-serving, provided a window into how he, Secretary Chertoff, and the White House responded to Hurricane Katrina. His testimony raises questions about the competence of the response at the highest levels of government.

The majority supplemental views emphasize Mr. Brown's insubordination and failure to follow the National Response Plan. We agree that Mr. Brown's testimony demonstrates serious deficiencies in his job performance. But his testimony also raises questions about the roles of Secretary Chertoff and White House officials that remain unanswered to this day.

Mr. Brown testified that he recognized that FEMA was overwhelmed and needed assistance from other departments, especially DOD. He said he tried to get this assistance by working the process from the bottom up, by sending requests through the FEMA mission assignment process, and from the top down, by requesting White House assistance. Neither seemed to work.

In previous disasters, Mr. Brown had been able to rely on the White House to break through red tape. But this time, operating with a new Secretary of Homeland Security and under the newly created National Response Plan, he said that the White House was less responsive to his requests. Mr. Brown appeared to have no clear method for getting what he needed from other agencies. Mr. Brown said that when he informed White House officials of the problems he was having, nobody at the White House took any initiative to break through bureaucratic obstacles.

Even after the publication of lengthy reports by this Committee and by the White House, we still know very little about what top White House officials knew and what actions they took to respond to Hurricane Katrina.

MR. BROWN'S TESTIMONY ABOUT THE WHITE HOUSE

Mr. Brown testified that he had "innumerable" conversations with White House officials, including the President, the Vice President, Andrew Card, Joe Hagin, National Security Adviser Steven Hadley, Lee Ann McBride, Karl Rove, and Domestic Policy Adviser Claude Allen. He said that he had probably spoken to Homeland Security Adviser Fran Townsend, but that he did not have regular contact with her.

Mr. Brown stated that he did not know how many conversations he had with the President. He said that the President would occasionally join in on his calls with Joe Hagin. Mr. Brown stated:

“From my point of view, at that time, the President was clearly engaged.”

Mr. Brown stated that although FEMA did not have Cabinet-level status under this Administration, he had been able to work well with the White House in previous disasters. In previous disasters, “if I needed anything specific, I would relay that to Hagin or Card and it would get done.”

Things worked differently during this Hurricane Katrina. This time, the White House became “bureaucratic” and provided less assistance. During one phone call, Andrew Card told him that requests need to go through the “chain of command.” He understood Mr. Card to be telling him, “if you really need something, you need to go to Chertoff or back through HSOC or whatever you are going to do and do those requests that way.”

Informed that White House Deputy Homeland Security Adviser Ken Rapuano had told the Committee that when he left the White House at 10 p.m. on Monday, August 29, conflicting reports were still coming in about the severity of the impact on New Orleans, Mr. Brown testified that these statements were “disingenuous.”

He argued that the White House should have had clear information about the severity by that time and should have known that the levees had breached. He noted specifically that White House Homeland Security Council staff, including Ken Rapuano, Bethany Nichols, and Joel Bagnol, were on the regular video teleconferences that provided situational information.

He pointed to a teleconference held the evening of August 29 to discuss Marty Bahamonde’s report on the grim condition of New Orleans, and noted: “So either they all went home or they were all asleep during the SVTS, but there was a conference call that evening to discuss exactly what Marty had reported.”

Mr. Brown would not respond to a question about whether he thought it was irresponsible for Mr. Rapuano, the most senior official in the White House at the time, to go home at 10 p.m. without clear situational awareness, but noted that he would have acted differently.

MR. BROWN’S TESTIMONY ABOUT SECRETARY CHERTOFF

Mr. Brown told the Committee that Secretary Chertoff was not involved in the response immediately. Once he became involved however, Mr. Chertoff called frequently regarding “the most minute details of operation.” According to Mr. Brown, “the micromanagement was amazing,” to the point where Mr. Brown stated that he “couldn’t get my job done.” He also said that Mr. Chertoff’s involvement “exacerbated” problems.

Mr. Brown expressed dismay at the “whole leadership issue,” stating that “the problem I had was, I wasn’t perceived as the leader down there because I was undermined. Who was the face of Katrina?” He continued:

In Florida, who’s in charge of Florida? By God, I’m in charge. Now, in Louisiana and Mississippi, we’ve got this whole dance going around. Is Chertoff in charge? Is Mr. Brown in charge? The President? Who’s in charge here?

Well, in my opinion, the President's always in charge, and when it comes these disasters whatever the cause of the disasters is, the Under Secretary of Homeland Security, the Director of FEMA, he's in charge. But you can't be the leader and you can't do that when you're being undermined and micromanaged.

Mr. Brown told the Committee that he was "specifically constrained by Secretary Chertoff and told to stay in Baton Rouge." On Wednesday, August 31, as he was on a plane flying back from Biloxi and a meeting with Governor Barbour, "I received a phone call in which I got my rear end chewed out by Michael Chertoff for having been in Mississippi." He said that in that call, "I was instructed not to leave Baton Rouge." He also said: "I knew that this FEMA Director could not operate under those conditions because you can't run a disaster sitting in an office. . . . I can't sit in a stupid office and try to run a disaster that covers 90,000 square miles and run it like a blasted bureaucrat." Mr. Brown stated that this call was the "tipping point because I knew, okay, this is a different game."

CONCLUSION

The Committee's meeting with Mr. Brown was a valuable addition to the investigative record. His failure to work within the system did not reflect well on Mr. Brown, as the majority views note. But his statements also raise serious questions about the performance of the White House and Secretary Chertoff that should be further examined.