

# The Coast Guard's New Captain

■ As both a military service and a law enforcement agency, the Coast Guard has learned to be bureaucratically bilingual.

**N**ow that we've officially entered the 2006 hurricane season, the man tasked with rescuing last year's bungled post-Katrina operation has taken the helm of the U.S. Coast Guard. On May 25, Adm. Thad Allen became the commander of America's fifth armed service. *National Journal* Staff Correspondent James Kitfield spoke with Allen about the lessons of Katrina, the evolution of the Department of Homeland Security, and his vision for the Coast Guard. Edited excerpts follow.

By James Kitfield

■ NJ: The Bush administration got a severe black eye from what was widely viewed as a slow, confused, and ineffectual response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Yet you personally, and the Coast Guard in general, were given high marks in most post-Katrina assessments. Was there something about responding to such a mammoth disaster that somehow played to the Coast Guard's strengths?

■ Allen: I think it goes back to authority, autonomy, and accountability, which are principles that kind of pervade the Coast Guard. Over a 200-plus-year history, we've developed an almost frontier-like ethos of independent operations. That goes back to our first days as the "Revenue Marine," when independent cutters were steaming around looking for British smugglers who were trying to avoid paying taxes, because America at that time was trying to pay off its war debt. Or the lone Coast Guard cutter cruising off the coast of Alaska just after the United States purchased it from Russia. Or the commander of an isolated lifeboat station today.

In my opinion, the operational genius of the Coast Guard is still that we give our field commanders a mission, an area of responsibility, and their own resources

and assets, such as cutters and aircraft, and then we leave it up to them. Our field commanders are responsible for assessing the threats in their regions and reacting accordingly, and they don't require any higher approval to do so. Of course, if an operation goes south because of their judgments, we also hold them accountable.

■ NJ: In the wake of the initial, bungled response to Katrina, then-Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Michael Brown, a political appointee, was held responsible and replaced by you as the principal federal official on scene. Looking back, what do you think was the major problem with the federal response at that point?

■ Allen: We were operating under what I call a "legacy response" to a natural disaster. A national emergency or disaster is declared under the Stafford Act and FEMA flows resources into the area to assist state and local governments, just as it had the year before with all the hurricanes in Florida.

FEMA had established that process with Katrina, but instead of a normal hurricane landing we had the breaching of the levees in New Orleans and what I call a weapon of mass effect, without

■ Thad Allen

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criminality. The city of New Orleans was totally disabled. City officials had lost their command-and-control infrastructure and capability, and they had virtually no situational awareness as to what was actually happening. There were forces operating on the scene, including search-and-rescue teams, disaster medical-assist teams, Coast Guard forces, and state and local responders, but they were disconnected and operating in small, self-organized groups.

Disaster-relief supplies were flowing in, but there was nobody to take control of them and deploy them to where they were needed most. Someone needed to take tactical operational control to organize the relief mission, and that was not part of FEMA's job description.

■ NJ: Wasn't that the job that eventually fell to you?

■ Allen: Yes, but I faced a quandary. How much independent authority did I have to organize the mission when that was really a state and local government responsibility? So we had to negotiate everything. I would sit down with Terry Ebbert [the city's homeland-security director] and Lt. Gen. Russ Honore [commander of Northern Command's Joint Task Force], and together we would come up with a proposal for what needed to happen next, and then take it to the city's leadership. While city officials would usually acquiesce to our plans, it was a highly fluid and sometimes chaotic way to operate.

If I had come in as the principal federal official and insisted on absolute unity of command, however, I felt it would actually have impeded some good work that had been started. So I elected to go for unity of effort instead. In the end, both myself and Russ Honore took a lot of license in determining what needed to be done, but whenever there was a strong objection by the city, Mayor [Ray] Nagin had the last word.

■ NJ: As the nation is poised for another potentially devastating hurricane season, a recent GAO report concluded that the issue of who



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exactly will be in charge in another Katrina-like disaster is still not clear. How is that possible after the Homeland Security Department has spent so much time and effort refining the National Response Plan?

■ Allen: Well, the NRP envisioned three basic scenarios, and with each of them you can envision someone else running the operation, depending on the circumstances. The first scenario is a national symbolic security event such as a Super Bowl or major political convention, the second is a natural disaster like a hurricane, and the third is a terrorist attack. The problem with Katrina was that it was a hybrid event somewhere between a natural disaster and a terrorism attack with mass effect. Because of that, no one immediately emerged as the logical official to take charge on scene. That's where I walked in.

■ NJ: What if another hurricane on the scale of Katrina hits this season?

■ Allen: I think we're much further along in establishing clear lines of command and communication than last year. Just last week, DHS took predesignated principal federal officials and the field coordinating officers from FEMA, and teamed them for a week of planning with their state counterparts in anticipation of hurricane season. I can tell you that they came out of that weeklong training significantly bonded, because

I have a lot of my Coast Guard admirals working with them.

So we've come a long way in smoothing that relationship between federal, state, and local officials in terms of how they will need to work together in an actual crisis. What we can't know until a disaster actually occurs is how much city and state infrastructure will be in place to receive federal relief and resources.

■ NJ: And until an actual disaster occurs, we can't know whether a city, state, or federal official will actually be in charge?

■ Allen: The U.S. Constitution stipulates that all powers not granted to the federal government reside in the states. Believe me, I repeated that to myself quite a few times last year!

■ NJ: Numerous reports have chronicled the difficulties at the Department of Homeland Security since it was established in 2002. In retrospect, do you think Congress underestimated just how hard it would be to merge so many different agencies under an umbrella organization?

■ Allen: Well, in a way, DHS is the agency that democracy produced. The original Homeland Security Act that was signed in December of 2002 had some very aggressive timelines associated with it, for instance, yet at the time it was signed, Congress was between sessions and the feder-

al government was in the middle of its fiscal year. That created enormous challenges for a department that was just standing up and trying to get the bricks-and-mortar right and figure out where everybody should be located.

Despite that challenge, however, I think we've made more progress than is generally known. In our first two years of operation at DHS, for instance, we were able to aggregate all of our handgun purchases and issue a national handgun contract for all of the various agencies, which is pretty significant. We've also bundled a number of large software purchases. Those things may not be very visible to the public, but they represent significant incremental improvements.

In parallel to building this new institution, we're also continuing to conduct homeland-security missions and countering threats in an environment where there is zero tolerance for failure. That remains a tremendously difficult thing to do, but we continue to get a little bit better at it each day.

■ NJ: Do you believe that the Coast Guard thrives in DHS in part because it is traditionally so comfortable in a multiagency environment?

■ Allen: I think that has put us in good stead. In part that results from our dual character as both a law enforcement and a military service, and partly it is the result of many years where we steadily accrued new duties as essentially a holding company for anything that was wet.

Each time we've assumed a new duty or function into the Coast Guard, we've adapted by absorbing the cultures and dialects that went with them. After focusing on guarding the U.S. coasts during World War II, for instance, we moved into monitoring recreational boating safety, enforcing fisheries laws and maritime environmental regulations, combating migrant smuggling at sea, interdicting narcotics shipments as part of the war on drugs, and establishing port security after 9/11. In responding to each of those transnational threats and challenges, we became more familiar with the interagency process. Today, I like to say that one of the core competencies of the Coast Guard is that we're bureaucratically bilingual. ■

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