

King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts ***Disasters: Are you ready?***

Me, My, I

Passage of the FFY07 Homeland Security spending bill by congress has brought up another issue relating to Presidential Authority.

President Bush issued what is called a “Signing Statement” on the same day in which he signed the legislation into law. In the signing statement he rejected numerous aspects of the legislation, to include the effort by Congress to establish some minimum qualifications for the position of Director of FEMA. A “duh” need if there ever was one.

You can read several stories one from the Boston Globe and another from the Washington Post Newspapers on this topic in this week’s edition of Eric’s Corner.

What I’d like to comment on is the notion of we---they and Me, My, I. President Bush in issuing the signing statement was, **hopefully!**, not arguing that we need a professional emergency manager running FEMA, but it was about presidential authority and his prerogative to appoint who he wants. Clearly he was putting his foot down and saying, No—that’s my job. In doing so he is reinforcing a “we—they” relationship with Congress.

Which leads me to the issue of Me, My, I. If we are going to survive the next disaster and certainly any catastrophe we all have to be working together. It is the basis for the National Response Plan (NRP) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS). The idea of be of one mind in responding to disasters is the foundation for interoperable communications. If you exist in the world of me, my, and I then we are doomed to failure when we get beyond the normal emergency type of events. For it is disasters that overwhelm our individual agency and jurisdictional capacities to respond and we will depend on one another for mutual aid and assistance.

If a foundation of “we” thinking and acting does not exist before the disaster, then don’t expect it to magically appear in the midst of the disaster response. When I point to the first days of the response to

Katrina in New Orleans, you could immediately tell that there was no “we” in the disaster response from the city, state or feds.

Lots of things “roll down hill” and one of them is the tone and style of leadership. So how the chief elected official leads his jurisdiction is a critical element that will determine how his or her agency will work collaboratively with other agencies and with the legislative branch of government.

In order to get out of the Me, My, I way of thinking you have to get out of the “I’m in Charge” mind set and give up some authority in order to achieve a more effective disaster response.

One of the weaknesses of the NRP and NIMS documents as they currently exist is that they espouse the “working together” concept, but do not provide any specifics on how that will come about. Just saying that there will be Unified Command and a Joint Information Center (JIC) does not make it magically happen. If you look for the specifics of the “how” state and local jurisdictions will be integrated in the federal response I think these documents will be found to be seriously flawed.

So, I’m not that concerned about the fact that the signing statement rejected having a trained and experience emergency manager leading FEMA, but rather the overall philosophy being expressed of Me, My, I, and ---- the rejection of a collaborative working relationship with congress. For, as we know, there is no I in Team. Sometimes I’ve heard the term one team, one fight. As spectators of the national political process we are watching several teams, and they certainly are fighting—but with one another.