

**NEW ORLEANS IS SINKING AND I DON'T WANT TO SWIM:  
HOMELAND SECURITY, FEMA AND THE POLITICS OF BLAME**

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On August 29, 2005, water crashed over and breached the levees surrounding large sections of New Orleans, Louisiana and flooded much of the city. Over 1,600 deaths and billions of dollars in damage later, New Orleans is still recovering from a natural disaster that ranks among the worst in American history, alongside the now legendary 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, the 1900 Galveston Hurricane and the 1889 Johnstown Flood. Like those disasters, Hurricane Katrina is already a tale of American mythology. It has prompted a demonstrably superhuman volunteer effort and response, become a beacon and rallying cry for those who have sought to point out the problems and ineptitude of the current presidential administration, and sparked a vicious battle over blame avoidance, pitting an agency against a larger department, a city and state against the federal government, and an embattled administration against members of Congress, from both Democratic and Republican persuasions. While the Iraq war and the global war on terrorism continue to dominate George W. Bush's legacy, the Katrina disaster and its aftermath that has exposed weaknesses in government management and responsiveness may well become even more synonymous with this administration than the continued war on terrorism.

Hurricane Katrina offers evidence of many of the concerns that had been articulated ever since the Department of Homeland Security was created in 2002. Roundtables, conferences, and papers by public administration scholars over the past five years, as well as Congressional discussions about the post-9/11 security options, had forewarned of overhauling the federal government in such a way that would lead to programmatic incoherence and decreased responsiveness.

This paper focuses on how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) went from being touted as a model of agency efficiency and effectiveness under the Clinton administration to a hamstrung, dysfunctional entity of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under the George W. Bush administration. It looks first at the reasons as to why FEMA was considered an exemplar for bureaucratic efficiency. It then offers an assessment of competing views and concerns about placing FEMA within the DHS and the likely consequences thereof. Finally, it recounts the Hurricane Katrina episode with a keen eye to debunking some of the politics of blame.

My central question throughout is whether FEMA can even be held responsible for Katrina's perhaps more avoidable effects on the city of New Orleans or whether scapegoats and pariahs, in particular former FEMA chief Michael Brown, indeed are to blame for the needless destruction? My conclusions are ultimately somewhere in between, and the value of this paper rests largely with the tracing of FEMA from an agency of effectiveness to one of dysfunction. I make no secret of my belief that the unwieldy DHS is largely to blame and that from its inception set in motion the poor FEMA response to the hurricane.

## **1. The Federal Emergency Management Agency as an Effective Responder**

FEMA's success story under Clinton has been credited largely to the leadership of James Lee Witt, Arkansas's emergency services director, who took over as the head of FEMA in 1993. Steven and Carolyn Daniels document this renewal of FEMA in a paper developed for the PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government's 2000 Presidential Transition Series. They outline several lessons that can

be learned from FEMA's experience, focusing on what the agency had done to revitalize itself (recruit experienced professionals, develop a clear mission and structure the agency accordingly, leverage the presidency, utilize staff and the media, and build partnerships with other governmental and non-governmental partners). The Daniels Report is a fine summary of public administration bottom-up ideas to increase effectiveness and autonomy of government agencies. Witt's leadership provided a much-needed change of course. The focus of the Daniels Report is on the disaster relief programs provided by FEMA and follows their management from the George Bush Sr. administration through the second Clinton term. They argue that the agency was under-funded and under-performing during the Bush years because the administration would often bypass FEMA and centralize disaster response in the White House. Clinton, however, recast federal disaster response and appointed Witt, his emergency services director while Governor of Arkansas, to head FEMA. Witt invested in strategic planning and visioning and FEMA transformed from a dysfunctional agency into a top performer.

Under Witt's direction, the agency based future management decisions on six goals related to the new mission:

1. Create emergency management partnership with other federal agencies, state and local governments, volunteer organizations, and the private sector
2. Establish a national emergency management system that is comprehensive, risk-based, and all-hazards in approach
3. Make hazard mitigation the foundation of the national emergency management system
4. Provide a rapid and effective response to any disaster
5. Strengthen state and local emergency management
6. Revitalize the agency and develop a more effective and involved cadre of FEMA managers, permanent employees and disaster reservists (Daniels, 2000: 16)

The proactive strategy was an attempt to decrease disaster costs by refocusing the disaster management system on mitigation. But the agency was not free of problems during the Clinton years. Increasing the political and public profile certainly helped with the increase in requests and declarations during the Clinton years, however FEMA was slow to develop explicit or more stringent criteria for providing major disaster assistance. The Daniels suggest that in fairness, much of this was due to the reluctance of Congress to abandon their roles as disaster ombudsmen for their districts and states. Storms and disasters are always political, and all levels of politicians want to be seen by their constituents as proactive when one hits. FEMA's role coming out of the Clinton administration was to utilize resources for all parts of the federal government, coordinate with the White House and any department or agency whose services are required. Under Witt, FEMA certainly acted as if it had achieved a degree of "bureaucratic autonomy" (see Carpenter, 2001), providing a vital service to the public and being allowed to coordinate other agencies.

When George W. Bush became president, he appointed Joe Allbaugh, his chief of staff while Governor of Texas, as FEMA's director. Allbaugh resigned in 2002 after overseeing 89 disasters including the on-the-ground response to 9/11. The brief Allbaugh tenure was generally seen as positive, particularly the agency's New York City response

in the days after the World Trade Center attacks. Allbaugh's strategic plan is an extension of what Witt began, with a number of key goals outlined:

1. Reduce life and loss of property
2. Minimize suffering and disruption caused by disasters
3. Prepare the nation to address consequences of terrorism
4. Serve as the nation's portal for emergency management information and expertise
5. Create a motivating and challenging work environment for employees
6. Make FEMA a world class enterprise (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2001)

These core values suggested improvements upon Witt's direction to further enhance FEMA's position in responding to disasters. The pre-9/11 strategic plan, if implemented, might have fulfilled Witt's goal of achieving a more autonomous and dynamic agency. 9/11 changed that. FEMA was transferred into the newly created Department of Homeland Security and its former Deputy Director and General Counsel, Michael Brown, took over as the first Under Secretary of FEMA in 2003.

## **2. FEMA within the Homeland Security Organizational Structure**

The agencies that became part of the DHS are housed in four major directorates: Border and Transportation Security, Emergency Preparedness and Response, Science and Technology, and Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection. The directorates are summarized below:

1. The Border and Transportation Security directorate brings the major border security and transportation operations under one roof, including the Customs Service and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center from the Treasury Department, most of the INS and the Office for Domestic Preparedness from the Justice Department, the Federal Protective Service from the General Services Administration (GSA), the new Transportation Security Administration from the Department of Transportation, and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service from the Agriculture Department.
2. The Emergency Preparedness and Response directorate oversees domestic disaster preparedness training and coordinate government disaster response. It will bring together the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Strategic National Stockpile and the National Disaster Medical System from the Department of Health and Human Services, the Nuclear Incident Response Team from the Department of Energy, the Domestic Emergency Support Teams from Justice, and the FBI's National Domestic Preparedness Office.
3. The Science and Technology directorate leads the federal government's efforts to prepare for and respond to terrorist threats involving weapons of mass destruction. It includes the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Countermeasures Programs and the Environmental Measurements Laboratory from Energy, the National

Biological Weapons Defense Analysis Center from the Defense Department, and the Plum Island Animal Disease Center from Agriculture.

4. The Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection (IAIP) directorate analyzes intelligence and information from other agencies (including the CIA, FBI, DIA and NSA) involving threats to homeland security and evaluate vulnerabilities in U.S. infrastructure. It will bring together the Critical Infrastructure Assurance Office from the Department of Commerce, the Federal Computer Incident Response Center from the GSA, the National Communications System from Defense, the National Infrastructure Protection Center from the FBI, and the Energy Security and Assurance Program from Energy.

The Secret Service (from Treasury) and the Coast Guard (from Transportation) are also located in the DHS, remaining intact, and reporting directly to the Secretary. In addition, the newly named Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services reports directly to the deputy secretaries. All the agencies were merged and the department became operational on September 30, 2003. Prior to DHS's inception, Paul Light argued with respect to the multitude of agencies to be assembled under the department's umbrella that "it's just a hopeless jumble...I do this for a living and I can barely keep up" (Light, 2003).

A team of scholars at the Brookings Institution (known herein as O'Hanlon et al.) came down hard on the Bush administration's original proposal in their initial study of homeland security. They continued to argue that it was too cumbersome in their mid-2002 assessment of the department. But after the administration largely got its original proposal passed by Congress, the Brookings 2003 assessment, entitled *Protecting the American Homeland: One Year On*, warms up slightly to the plan, going so far as to suggest that in a number of respects it could work. This study is too optimistic because at times it is at odds with theories the authors themselves have developed in their extensive acumen on the subject. Certainly, these agencies are housed under one roof but realistically, it is going to take years to dissolve existing cultures and information sharing barriers that hinder cooperation.

James Q. Wilson has outlined the inherent problems with trying to break down bureaucratic cultures. First, tasks that are not part of the culture will not be attended to with the same energy and resources as are devoted to tasks that are part of it. Second, organizations in which two or more cultures struggle for supremacy will experience serious conflict as defenders of one seek to dominate representatives of the others. Third, organizations will resist taking on new tasks that seem incompatible with its dominant culture. The stronger and more uniform the culture - that is, the more the culture approximates a sense of mission - the more obvious these consequences (Wilson, 101).

Furthermore, the massive manpower shifts in DHS are not just in cyberspace or through a refocusing of the telecommunications and information-sharing networks that once connected many of these agencies. Many of these DHS employees will be housed in a new location near the capitol so the physical shift of resources will also take time.

The Brookings team argued for a more focused department and their recommendations were debated in the Senate but most were not implemented. One of their primary concerns was that some of the agencies had a wide range of functions not related to terrorism which would divert resources, both physical and human, away from

the central mission of preventing terrorist attacks. For example, FEMA responds to natural disasters, and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service set regulations for the humane treatment of animals. The DHS would also be responsible for confiscating stolen art works, setting mariner qualifications, and a list of other duties not essential to securing the homeland (O’Hanlon et al., 2003: 15-16). They recommended that DHS should concentrate “on functions that would gain most from integration – like border security – and others for which a central, integrated focus seems clearly needed – like intelligence and infrastructure protection” (O’Hanlon et al., 2003: 15-16). They also argued that emergency preparedness and response, and CBRN countermeasures programs should be dropped because the case was not made for their inclusion. In short, what is clear is that wrong agencies, with a focus on non-homeland security activities, have been included in the DHS, and correct ones, particularly those dealing with terrorism assessment and analysis, have not. This assessment most readily calls attention to the problems with placing FEMA under the purview of Homeland Security.

If these critics are correct, the department would likely be swamped by activities having nothing to do with fighting terrorism and, at the same time, may be unable to address the intelligence failures of intelligence organizations like the FBI and the CIA. At the National Academy of Public Administration’s Standing Panel on the Federal System Forum in October 2002, which included Light and other scholars, the members present believed that “based on experience with organizing and restructuring large federal agencies...getting a new federal department of such magnitude up and running could take eight to ten years and could distract attention from the more important factors in improving homeland security” (National Academy of Public Administration, 2002). The response to Katrina might be a symptom of this kind of amalgamation dysfunction.

On the positive side of this kind of government restructuring and coordination of a disparate bureaucracy is the fact that there are many capable executives and public service careerists working in the DHS. Joel Aberbach’s recent study of high-level federal executives, an extension of the research conducted for his book *In the Web of Politics* with Bert Rockman, shows that the quality of bureaucrats has not changed significantly since the National Performance Review. He suggests that “in short, the top part of the U.S. bureaucracy may have been under great stress during much of the [nineties], and it has been bent and reshaped in many ways, but, despite widely publicized fears, it has not broken” (Aberbach, 397). But DHS inherited constituent agencies that have gained notoriety as bastions of dysfunction, such as the INS. It takes more than competent bureaucrats to improve these agencies (for a more general assessment of DHS, see Gillies, 2005).

### **3. Katrina**

FEMA was not an agency characterized by dysfunction when it was appropriated for the DHS. While its workers were trained primarily in dealing with natural disasters, they had training in terrorism-related disasters and in turn trained local and state officials. But under DHS, it was the terrorism-related training that became paramount, with time and resources devoted to non-natural disaster emergency preparedness. In short, FEMA’s mission shifted to the kind of on-the-ground response to 9/11 as opposed to hurricane and flood management. With competing missions, FEMA started on a road to

dysfunction. Warning signs were apparent in the time between the DHS inception and Katrina. Searches of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* for the period of September 30, 2003 through the week prior to Katrina reveal news stories that show problems with FEMA's ability to get needed services and supplies during hurricane season. Hurricane Charley, its first major test as a DHS entity, was seen as a success. But hurricane victims complained about an overloaded and under-resourced FEMA. Getting information and responding to calls for aid, FEMA began showing dysfunctional tendencies. There were also concerns about non-hurricane related FEMA and homeland security aid. Funds were more and more tied to security related efforts and not to disaster aid (see Kettl, 71). But it was not readily clear whether these changes to disaster response and management had to do more with adapting to the new DHS environment or was more a question of leadership under Brown who had inherited an agency accustomed to autonomy. An internal audit of the agency released just a month before Katrina identified three major problems with FEMA's disaster response:

1. FEMA's computer system could not track and coordinate delivery of ice and water to Florida, resulting in millions of dollars worth of ice left unused at response centers, and \$1.6 million in leftover water returned to storage
2. An estimated 200,000 victims had to wait for temporary housing aid from disaster assistance employees because of backlogged computers.
3. Emergency personnel were potentially put at risk because the system did not provide real-time disaster warnings and other information (Jordan, 2005a).

What happened in the days leading up to August 29, 2005 is still a matter of speculation and has become a parlor game of sorts, with politicians at the local, state and federal levels, as well as the media, casting blame on the most dysfunctional entity or to exploit the most political capital in the under-preparedness sweepstakes. The blame game and the politics of blame avoidance are well documented (see Ellis, 1994, Weaver, 1986). Katrina is no exception. In analysis of news cycles between September 2005 and May 2006, blame has shifted from a focus primarily on FEMA and its Under Secretary Michael Brown to a more general one on the DHS and the administration. Michael Brown, the immediate scapegoat for the disaster, and the face of ridicule and derision by both Democrats and Republicans, has even been reassessed with some former critics agreeing with Brown that he was unfairly made a pariah.

### *The 2005 News Cycles*

Initial assessments of the destruction left by Katrina's wake would blame FEMA for first improperly informing administration officials of the likelihood of the New Orleans levees being breached, second for leaving thousands of residents stranded in flooded areas of New Orleans and in makeshift disaster centers particularly the Superdome and third for then blaming local and state officials for the majority of the problems. FEMA was primarily faulted for the dysfunctional response to the hurricane, the inability to get aid to those who really needed it, and its failure to coordinate the rescue and relief effort. In short, FEMA was the lightning rod of blame.

Louisiana state and New Orleans officials, representing Governor Kathleen Blanco and Mayor Ray Nagin, were quick to focus their frustration and attention on FEMA. Congress, while engaging in partisan blame casting initially, focused on FEMA as the images of the flooding in New Orleans came back to Washington. Lastly, the administration quickly distanced itself from FEMA and over the course of two weeks handed Michael Brown his walking papers. Brown, called on to testify before a House of Representatives panel as to his role in Katrina placed blame initially with state and local officials. He argued that his “biggest mistake was not recognizing by Saturday [the 27<sup>th</sup>] that Louisiana was dysfunctional,” two days before Katrina hit (Jordan, 2005b). These kinds of comments played into the hands of his critics. The White House initially defended FEMA but reversed course when more and more negative attention was placed on the agency. What started as a response that blamed Democratic state and local officials morphed into a more general bureaucratic problem with public servants.

By October 2005, the administration, including DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, argued that FEMA needed to be revamped and its existing model and mission did not respond well to disasters (Pace, 2005). By year’s end, journalistic assessments of the Katrina blame game looked at how Louisiana state officials and the White House were in a bitter blame rivalry with Blanco, a Democrat, hostile to the Republican administration. For Blanco, FEMA was simply unresponsive to the needs of hurricane victims while the White House went out of their way to make Louisiana culpable for the dysfunctional response (Lipton, 2005: A39).

### *The 2006 News Cycles*

Either because his administration allies turned their backs or whether he was just tired of being blamed for the hurricane itself, Michael Brown returned to Congress and blamed the White House response as the chief culprit responsible for Katrina. In Senate committee testimony in February 2006, Brown contended that he had informed White House officials to prepare for the worst. But they were slow to respond because it was not the right kind of disaster. Brown suggests that if “we’ve confirmed that a terrorist had blown up the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal levee, then everybody would have jumped all over that and been trying to do everything they could” (Lipton, 2006a: D3). He also argued that both White House and DHS officials had continued to scapegoat him and FEMA about the pre-Katrina response. Evidence came to light that corroborated much of Brown’s testimony, showing that the White House and DHS waited too long to respond. By the time testimony had been completed in March and April of House and Senate Committees investigating the hurricane, it was now DHS and FEMA to be blamed for the response. While all levels of government were blamed for the poor response, the Senate found the major problems to be located with the DHS superstructure and its lack of communication and coordination. Chertoff, and not Brown, was the spotlight, while each head continued to blame the other (see Lipton, 2006b: A20, New York Times, 2006a, New York Times, 2006b). FEMA’s effectiveness was severely diminished when placed inside DHS. The Senate’s verdict was to dismantle FEMA altogether and create the National Preparedness and Response Authority, still within DHS, but with more power, additional components and a larger budget (Lipton, 2006c: A22).

### *Why the Change in Blame?*

If the question at hand is what agency and level of government should shoulder the most blame for Katrina, the eight month set of news cycles has now largely focused on the Department of Homeland Security and the Bush administration as the real offenders. The White House could not spin this disaster their way and over the course of these few months, the media and the majority of the public now point the finger at administrative ineptitude and not at state or local governments. Ray Nagin's May 20<sup>th</sup> reelection seems to confirm this opinion and also suggests that even citizens of New Orleans recognize that natural disaster response is primarily a federal government responsibility. Economic assessments of Katrina, by Sobel and Leeson, and William Shughart, suggest that blame lies both in the centralization of disaster response with the federal government (see Sobel and Leeson, 29) and, from a public choice perspective, that lethargy and politicization of the public sector's response to Katrina is fitting with self-interested politicians unconcerned with the socioeconomically depressed city of New Orleans (see Shughart, 15-16, note that his conclusion from the small government public choice perspective ironically lends credence to rap musician Kanye West's assessment that George Bush does not care about black people)

Change in blame occurred through a widening of information available to the public. With the power of the bully pulpit, the administration could prepare a national response to the hurricane. Over time, however, that power diminishes once the public becomes more aware of competing opinions and assessments (see Edwards, 2003). FEMA gradually ceased to be the lone offender and now became seen as part of a larger problem of departmental dysfunction with poor leadership from the administration

### **Conclusion: How to Rescue FEMA**

Four years ago, FEMA was a competent, well-run agency within the United States public service. It had built up a decade of successful disaster management under competent leadership. While public service leaders are indeed an important part of building agency autonomy and effectiveness, it is safe to say that Michael Brown alone did not lead FEMA down a path of dysfunction. This was much more a result of placing FEMA in a ramshackle and incoherent departmental framework (see Gillies, 2005). Dan Henstra's work on mitigation and emergency management suggested that prior to Katrina, DHS would have some negative implications for FEMA. Henstra argued that with DHS' "heavy emphasis on terrorism, the new department appears unaccommodating to the development of policies for mitigating natural hazards" (Henstra, 2003: 112). As Katrina demonstrates, FEMA was not "better equipped to implement hazard mitigation" because the focus was "hijacked by an exclusive emphasis on terrorism" (Henstra, 112).

The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, in their May 2006 700-page report on Katrina, argue for the abolishment of FEMA and to replace the agency with a National Preparedness and Response Authority (NPRO). The NPRO would exist within the DHS and be endowed with "the full range of responsibilities that are core to preparing for and responding to disasters. These include the four central functions of comprehensive emergency management – mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery – which need to be integrated" (Senate Committee on Homeland Security

and Governmental Affairs, 2006: 18). They also suggest that regional operations be enhanced to provide better coordination between federal agencies and the states, that a government-wide operations center be created to provide enhanced situational awareness and manage interagency coordination in a disaster, that commitments at all levels of government to the nation's emergency management system be renewed and sustained, and that the nation's capacity to respond to catastrophic events be strengthened and improved (Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2006: 17-21).

A thorough read of this report suggests further bureaucratic tinkering and organization chart rearranging that leads to nothing better than what exists presently. If anything, more name-changing and the abolishment of FEMA would just increase the length of time before proper coordination is possible. The problem, at least to this scholar, is that FEMA is not responsible, nor should be, for homeland security initiatives. A far easier approach to FEMA would be to remove it entirely from the DHS framework and give it back its autonomy as an independent agency capable of coordinating other agencies and departments in a time of disaster response.

A key element that is neglected in both the Senate report and in the House Committee on Homeland Security's May 2006 Katrina "Lessons Learned" legislation (H.R. 5351) is that hurricane and flood season is an annual event in the United States. Sophisticated meteorological tracking of hurricanes and ample flood watching by local, state and federal authorities has made disaster response easier to coordinate because there are months in the year when there is a far more likely chance of a natural disaster occurring. Hurricanes are routinely predicted and evacuations are possible in the days before landfall. Terrorist attacks are nowhere near as predictable.

FEMA worked well as an autonomous agency precisely because it was given the freedom to act during hurricane and flood season, unhindered by the Department of Homeland Security. It had less to do with Witt's leadership than with the autonomy built up by the agency. Giving FEMA back its authority as an independent agency would help with the remainder of the foundational recommendations of the Senate committee and would not require that coordination occur within and through the dysfunctional DHS.

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