



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Hurricane Katrina: The Roles of DHS and FEMA Leadership”
February 10, 2006

Today, in our eighteenth hearing on Hurricane Katrina, the Committee will examine how the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA coordinated and led the federal preparations for and response to Hurricane Katrina.

Our first panel this morning consists of Michael Brown and Patrick Rhode, who were FEMA’s director and acting deputy director, in the days leading up to and following the storm. As Katrina neared the Gulf Coast, Mr. Brown dispatched to Louisiana, leaving Mr. Rhode as the top-ranking official at FEMA headquarters. Today we will discuss their leadership of the agency during this enormously challenging period.

Our second panel consists of two senior officials at DHS headquarters. Robert Stephan is the Assistant Secretary for Infrastructure Protection and one of the chief architects of the National Response Plan. Matthew Broderick runs the Department’s Homeland Security Operations Center, which serves as the “eyes and ears” of top DHS officials, particularly during times of crisis. Secretary Chertoff relied heavily on Mr. Stephan and Mr. Broderick during Katrina’s aftermath. We will discuss their roles and their views of FEMA from the top of the organizational chart.

Our panels today separate witnesses from a federal agency, FEMA, from those of its parent organization, DHS. The separation is deliberate. It reflects in part the differing perspectives on Katrina that we have heard consistently from officials of the two entities. It also reflects tension between the two that pre-dates the storm, tension over resources, roles, and responsibilities within the Department. This tension is clear in Mr. Brown’s response when Committee investigators asked him why FEMA was not prepared for Katrina. Mr. Brown responded, “Its mission had been marginalized; its response capability had been diminished. . . . There’s the whole clash of cultures between DHS’ mission to prevent terrorism and FEMA’s mission to respond to and to prepare for responding to disasters of whatever nature.”

By almost any measure, FEMA’s response to Katrina has to be judged a failure. I must say that I have come to this conclusion with a sense of remorse, because I have been struck throughout this investigation by the extraordinary efforts of many FEMA professionals in the field as well as some FEMA and DHS officials at headquarters, who literally worked around the clock to try to help bring relief to people in the Gulf States. But the response was riddled with missed opportunities and poor decision-making, and failed leadership.

The responsibility for FEMA's – and, for that matter, the Department's – failed response is shared. While DHS's playbook appears designed to distance headquarters as much as possible from FEMA, the Department's leaders must answer for decisions they made – or failed to make – that contributed to the problems.

One problem that manifested itself in a variety of ways was the Department's lack of preparedness for the Katrina catastrophe. Instead of springing into action or, better yet, acting before the storm made landfall, the Department appears to have moved haltingly, and, as a result, key decisions were either delayed or made based on questionable assumptions. The day after the storm, for example, Secretary Chertoff named Michael Brown as the lead federal official for the response effort. At the same time, the Secretary declared Hurricane Katrina an "Incident of National Significance," which is a designation that triggers the National Response Plan. The National Response Plan, in turn, is the comprehensive, national roadmap that guides the federal response to catastrophes.

The Secretary's action led many to question why the "Incident of National Significance" declaration had not been made earlier. But, in reality, the declaration itself was meaningless, because, by the plain terms of the National Response Plan, Hurricane Katrina had become an "Incident of National Significance" three days earlier when the President declared an emergency in Louisiana. The lack of awareness of this fundamental tenet of the National Response Plan raises questions about whether DHS leadership was truly ready for a catastrophe of this magnitude. And I think it helps explain the Department's slow, sometimes hesitant response to the storm.

Similarly, we will learn today that FEMA leaders failed to take steps that they knew could improve FEMA's ability to respond more effectively and quickly to a catastrophe. In the year or so preceding Katrina, Mr. Brown was presented with two important and highly critical assessments of FEMA's structure and capabilities. Both included recommendations for improvements. The first was a memorandum produced by a cadre of FEMA's top operational professionals, known as "Federal Coordinating Officers." Among other things, the memo warns of unprepared emergency response teams that had no funding for training, exercises, or equipment.

The other was a study conducted by the MITRE Corporation of FEMA's capabilities. The study, commissioned by Mr. Brown, was designed to answer such questions as "What's preventing FEMA from responding and recovering as quickly as possible?"

The MITRE study is eerily predictive of the major problems that would plague the response to Hurricane Katrina. The study points out a "lack of adequate and consistent situational awareness across the enterprise," an "inadequate ability to control inventory and track assets," and undefined and misunderstood "standard operating procedures." Despite this study, key problems simply were not addressed and, as a result, opportunities to strengthen FEMA prior to Katrina were missed.

As the Committee winds down its lengthy series of hearings on the preparations for and response to Hurricane Katrina, we increasingly reflect upon what can be learned from the thousands of facts we have gathered. One thing I have found is a strong correlation between effective leadership and an effective response. Unfortunately, I have found the converse to be true as well.

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