

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

The Defense Department's Homeland Security Role:
How the Military Can and Should Contribute

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
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The conclusion of the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves that there is “an appalling gap” in our nation’s preparedness for chemical, biological, or nuclear terrorism underscores this Committee’s long-standing concern and is a call to action.

According to the Commission, America also remains far from having a practical and effective system for integrating military forces into our all-hazards, homeland-security structure. Commission members told the Armed Services Committee last

week that we have not achieved the level of planning and coordination we need to deal with a catastrophe. This lack of preparedness, the Commission stated, “puts the nation and its citizens at greater risk.”

Whether a catastrophe is caused by the indifferent forces of nature or by the calculated malevolence of humans, we must have workable, coordinated plans that integrate capabilities not only across the federal government, but also with states and localities to ensure an effective response.

As we saw in the Hurricane Katrina disaster of 2005, a catastrophe can overwhelm response capabilities in the devastated region. Given the numbers and locations of National Guard and Reserve units throughout the country, they are an

obvious and essential part of any large-scale, coordinated response.

This Committee's exhaustive investigation into the Hurricane Katrina disaster confirmed the enormous contributions made by Guard, Reserve, and active-duty troops in the wake of the hurricane. But that investigation also revealed serious shortcomings in the systems for controlling and coordinating the work of these personnel. For example, the then-head of Northern Command, Admiral Timothy Keating, testified that he had limited situational awareness of Guard units even as he was deploying active-duty units to the Gulf region.

Our Katrina investigation also found poor coordination between the Department of Defense

and the Department of Homeland Security. It found limited awareness at DHS of the military's capabilities in an emergency. It found a cumbersome process for making mission assignments. It found inadequate military training in the National Response Plan and in the National Incident Management System. I could expand the list, but the point is simply this: the lack of planning between DOD and DHS seriously hindered and delayed the response.

As the Commission's final report to Congress correctly notes, defining the National Guard's role in civil support raises "extremely complex" issues. That is why, in crafting the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, this Committee acted to address many coordination concerns. A key reform

was assigning a military liaison to every FEMA regional office.

This reform has already paid dividends. I saw this first-hand at a FEMA Region I exercise last year. Another provision of our reform act helps responses move more quickly, thanks to the use of more than 20 pre-scripted mission assignments that FEMA can issue to the military and other responders. These are great steps forward.

Even if Congress provided by statute that civil support during homeland disasters is a core competency and a primary responsibility of the Department of Defense, however, thorny questions would remain. Defining the appropriate roles and authorities of state governors, especially in multi-state catastrophes, and making the Guard and

Reserve a stronger presence in homeland-defense planning at a time when so many units are deployed overseas are among the difficult challenges.

And even when these difficult questions are answered, we face a practical challenge: Our National Guard forces are stretched too thin. General Punaro has said that last year's 88-percent-unready rating for Guard units has probably worsened because of the "treadmill" of extended and repeated overseas deployments.

Congress needs to do more to promote Guard recruitment, retention, training, equipping, and compensation. We call upon the brave men and women of the National Guard to augment the active-duty forces, as members of a Maine National Guard training team are now doing in Afghanistan. We ask

them to support disaster recovery, as Maine Army and Air Guard personnel did after Hurricane Katrina. Congress must ensure that the Guard can perform both missions effectively.

The Department of Defense has expressed concerns that civil support responsibilities could undermine the Guard's combat capability. Yet the engineering, communications, medical, logistical, policing, and other civil-support tasks required after a catastrophic earthquake, fire, or flood involve many of the same skills needed to perform those functions in a war zone. Temporary assignments in civil-support roles could actually enhance a unit's proficiency for supporting combat operations.

Congress must do nothing, however, to undercut the military's capability to deter foreign aggression

and to fight if deterrence fails. Defeating armed threats to the nation will always be the military's first mission. But the breadth of our military's skills and its deployment across the nation demand that we ensure that America's military is prepared to effectively augment civilian responses when catastrophe strikes in the homeland.

Finally, I would suggest to my colleagues that the "appalling gap" identified by the Commission should be a clarion call for us. Whatever view we take of the specific recommendations of the Commission, we can agree with the point General Punaro made at the Armed Services Committee hearing -- we must have *some* plan. This Committee has already taken legislative action to avert a repetition of the days following Hurricane Katrina's landfall, when civilian officials were improvising

command and logistics arrangements with the military in the midst of chaos.

I am pleased that FEMA now has military liaisons to help from the outset with the critical tasks of coordination. We must build on this progress by ensuring that the Guard and Reserve are ready to assist civil authorities under clear and workable plans.

I look forward to hearing more of our witnesses' thoughts on these matters.

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