

Thanks very much, Madam Chairman. I join you in welcoming our dear colleague Senator Mikulski and the other witnesses. After 21 hearings over the past two months and after hundreds of interviews conducted by our staffs, and hundreds of thousands of documents, we are nearing the end of our investigation into one of the worst natural disasters in American history; A disaster whose effects and echoes will carry far into the future, making our work today that much more important. I want to join in the thank yous that you expressed in the beginning of your remarks and I begin with you.

This has been an extraordinary experience, and in my eighteen years now in Congress, it has been a first rate investigation. It has been non-partisan, it has been professional, it has been thorough, and that all starts from the tone and substance that you've set as the chairman of the committee, and I can't thank you enough for that and the good working relationship that we've had and I know that we're going to stick together, finish this work, and make the most sound, most constructive recommendations that we possibly can. I join you in thanking the other members of the committee, who have gone on this long march with us, and have contributed greatly, members of both parties, to our work, and the staff: and I have to really say staff in the singular. One of the good aspects of this Committee is that we don't have a Democratic staff and a Republican staff, we have in this investigation one staff, working together to find out the truth and help us to learn from it, and I thank them, and their work, like ours, is not done. As a matter of fact, they have a lot of work to do in putting together the enormous amount of information that this investigation has gathered and in helping us to express it in an informative and compelling way to our colleagues in the Senate and to people in the public generally.

So we're concentrating on writing that report to try to explain to the American people what went wrong in the run-up to Hurricane Katrina and to its aftermath. And our hope of course is that in telling that story with as unwavering commitment to the truth as we can marshal, we will help people learn lessons, those in power and those who are not so that from knowledge and information will come change. It already has begun to happen in the federal government and in the state and local as well. But just as importantly, we have a responsibility ourselves, having gone through this experience to try to put forth our best ideas to be done to make sure that the next time, and there surely will be a next time, our government is better prepared to protect the American people.

Today we're going to hear from Senator Mikulski and other witnesses who have been working to improve our nation's preparedness for disasters and they can help us enormously. The fact is the failures of government associated with Hurricane Katrina were overwhelming and they occurred at all levels. That is clear from our investigation and I know is self-evident at this point to the American people. Government response to Hurricane Katrina was a national disgrace and it has shaken the confidence of the American people in their leaders' ability to protect them when they most need that protection. However, out of this catastrophe, which has been followed, I'm afraid, by a painfully slow and flawed recovery, we have a chance together to show the way to the creation of a new system of disaster preparedness response and recovery that learns from

those agencies that worked very well, like the Weather Service and the Coast Guard, while reforming those that did not, like FEMA. That is our charge.

I thank the witnesses, I hope that they will be bold in the recommendations that they make to us because the consequences, as we have seen in Katrina, to a lack of adequate preparation are severe to literally hundreds of thousands of people and to a great region of our country and one of the great cities in our country. And if we're not prepared to think boldly on how we can do better the next time, shame on us. So it's with that sense of high expectations that I look forward to this final but very important hearing in our Katrina investigation. And again, Madam Chairman, I thank you for your leadership.