Every year, in late summer and early fall, the Gulf Coast of the United States is prone to hurricanes that develop in the Atlantic, spin through the Caribbean, hit or skirt south of Florida, and gather strength in the warm Gulf waters. As the storms crash into the highly populated coastal areas, they inevitably leave great damage and destruction in their wake. Governments, of course, cannot control the weather. But they can save lives and minimize economic losses through protective investments and emergency preparedness. Unfortunately, as the massive Katrina bore down on New Orleans, poor planning and investment decisions left the city and its inhabitants excessively vulnerable to this catastrophic storm. And now, with much of New Orleans’ infrastructure and housing destroyed, and its residents scattered across the U.S., some never to return, we are again left searching for explanations to this, the latest, American disaster.

There were many failures, at all levels of government, planning for and responding to Katrina. The two of greatest magnitude, however, were the failure to build stronger levees and the failure to properly evacuate the city of New Orleans. Had it not been for these human errors, Katrina would still have been a large scale natural disaster resulting in great economic damage and the dislocation of thousands of people. The levee breaches, in combination with the failure to evacuate 100,000 mostly poor and mostly African-American individuals from the city center, however, transformed Katrina from a major natural disaster into a catastrophe resulting in over 1,000 deaths, the physical destruction and depopulation of a charismatic American city, the migration of thousands of New Orleans refugees across the nation, and a three day televised spectacle of an inept government failing to provide urgent care and assistance to helpless, desperate citizens. The enormity of this crisis has shaken the foundations of the U.S. Government.

The story of the levees is a long one whose full scope has yet to be revealed. Today we know that for over a decade the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has ranked a catastrophic hurricane and flood in New Orleans, which on average sits eight feet below sea level, as the third greatest risk faced by the U.S., behind a terrorist attack in New York City and a major earthquake in San Francisco. Nonetheless, the levees were only built to withstand a Category 3 hurricane. Katrina became a Category 5 hurricane while it traveled across the Gulf of Mexico, and was still a Category 4 hurricane when it made landfall. Its 20-25 foot flood surge overwhelmed the Industrial Canal, leading to a breach and flooding in large sections of the city. Studies are now revealing that other key failures occurred due to soil problems below the levees which made them vulnerable to pressure from Katrina’s water and high winds. Budget cuts, deferred or cancelled maintenance, diversion of funds to lower priority projects, lost engineering expertise in the federal government, and a host of other factors resulted in a levee system that government officials at all levels knew was inadequate. Facing a storm the strength of Katrina, New Orleans was left naked, virtually defenseless.
Knowing how vulnerable New Orleans was to a catastrophic flood, makes government officials’ failure to develop and execute an evacuation plan for all of its citizens even more inexcusable. But, clearly, such a plan did not exist. Those with cars and the wherewithal to evacuate did, both before and after the tardily issued mandatory evacuation orders were announced. Those without the means to leave either stayed in their homes or sought refuge in the shelters of last resort, the Superdome and Convention Center. State officials reportedly scrambled in the days before the storm’s arrival to contract buses from across Louisiana to provide transport for the poor, but without an organized, practiced plan, the effort crumbled. FEMA Director Michael Brown described the state and local governments as “dysfunctional” in the days before the storm hit. Yet, as the lead federal official on the scene, he too failed to assert his authority: to trigger alarms across the federal government that a crisis was at hand, task the military to deploy airlift capability and a massive ground convoy to New Orleans, and bring to safety the thousands of helpless people soon to be trapped in a city without food, water, electricity or communications.

Once the deluge hit, even the best prepared, most efficient emergency response operation would have had difficulty penetrating into the city and providing both emergency rescue and basic emergency supplies to such a large number of victims. But FEMA proved to be neither well prepared nor highly efficient. Indeed, the entire federal government (which by default had become the sole provider of relief once the flood knocked out virtually all local capabilities) appeared to be slumbering. The vacationing President paid scant attention to the crisis until a full day and a half after the storm had cleared, and only then with an imperial tilt of Air Force One over the ravaged Gulf Coast on his way back to the White House. And it was not until three days after the storm that federal military assets and substantial numbers of National Guard from neighboring states entered the city to provide aid and help restore order. In the meantime, the world was viewing on television tragic and horrifying scenes of citizens of the most prosperous country in human history suffering untold deprivation while a prostrate federal government seemed incapable of even the simple task of providing water to dehydrated children. Nothing characterized the out-of-touch response of President Bush, Secretary of Homeland Security Chertoff in which they both professed ignorance of people in dire need at the Convention Center after these scenes has already been reported on live television.

By this point, Katrina had mutated into not only a human tragedy and logistical nightmare, but a full scale political crisis. To fully understand why requires a review of how the Department of Homeland Security came into being. Ten months after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush endorsed the proposal, first floated by a bipartisan commission and later sponsored by congressional Democrats, to reorganize 22 agencies scattered across the federal government into a new Department of Homeland Security. He made congressional opposition to aspects of his proposal a key rallying cry during the 2002 midterm election and then continued to use the Department as a symbol of his commitment to protecting the American people from terrorism. This strategy worked. Throughout the run up to the 2004 election, the President consistently received strong ratings for his handling of homeland security. Polls showed that national security was the key issue leading to his reelection.
So, after thirty months of build-up and hype about the virtues of the Department of Homeland Security, its defrocking by Katrina came as a great shock to the public, which was simultaneously outraged by the pictures and stories of government ineptitude and horrified that its substantial investment of taxpayer dollars had not even bought them much protection from a large, but predicted, hurricane, let alone an unpredictable terrorist attack with weapons of mass destruction. Efforts to redirect blame to state and local officials simply did not resonate, as no one expects local government to have the resources or assets to deal with this level of crisis. What is more, eight months before Katrina struck, the Department of Homeland Security itself had announced with much fanfare a new National Response Plan, making clear that it was ultimately responsible during a catastrophic disaster to "rapidly deploy key essential resources" when state and local resources were "overwhelmed." The bull's-eye was painted squarely on the face of the federal authorities.

President Bush suggested that disasters of this scale require, "greater federal authority and a broader role for the military", and went so far as to recommend making the Department of Defense the lead agency for disaster response and recovery. Events conspired, however, to undercut his argument. When Hurricane Rita rumbled ashore four weeks after Katrina – with federal, state, and local authorities focused like a laser beam on avoiding a repeat performance of the New Orleans debacle – all went relatively smoothly. No new legal authorities were needed. Military assets were deployed early in the process while civilian agencies remained in charge. Indeed, the government’s performance during Rita demonstrated with clarity that it was not the law or policies that caused the Katrina tragedy, it was bad decision making, poor execution and inadequate leadership.

What then, is to be done, in the aftermath of such an epic botch?

While rewriting federal law to put the military in charge of disaster preparedness and response was not the appropriate reaction to Katrina, there are many other lessons to be learned and changes that need to be made:

- Congress urgently needs to reform the broken pork barrel system for allocating federal water projects. The system has been corrupted for decades. If this crisis fails to bring about reform, nothing ever will. Projects should be built based on risk – with public safety being the number one priority – not the agendas of private industry;
- FEMA needs to be revitalized with new leadership steeped in experience of emergency management. Changes have been made at the top, but it is time to clean out the political appointments that have sapped expertise from this critical agency. Moving the agency around on the federal organization chart, as some have proposed, will not solve the problem and could be counterproductive. FEMA was a model agency in the 1990s and it can be again with strong leadership, support from the White House, and a renewed sense of mission. Congress recently stripped FEMA of its role in disaster preparedness, making it strictly a recovery agency – this is a step in the wrong direction;
- State governments need to develop effective evacuation plans. New Orleans had 48 hours to prepare for Katrina; if there is a terrorist attack, there will be no warning at all and evacuations would be complicated by panic and confusion. All evacuation plans need to be reviewed to ensure that underserved populations are cared for. Even more fundamentally, transportation and logistics expertise must be applied to this problem so we can get greater utility out of existing infrastructure. Planning, public education, and communications must be improved if we are to have any chance of moving people out of harm’s way after a terrorist attack;
- Remarkably, the communications interoperability problem for first responders revealed on 9/11 is still with us. The Administration has a small, but active, unit working on standards and protocols, but a much more robust national effort will be needed to achieve the level of interoperability we need to deal with catastrophic disasters;
- Finally, all levels of government are going to have to continue working on the mundane, but difficult issue of intergovernmental and inter-agency coordination. There are no substitutes for planning and exercises. Investments in these areas will be far more productive than in fancy disaster response equipment that may never be used.

Nature will determine how frequently the U.S. will have to absorb the impacts of large scale hurricanes. But it is government policies and the skill of leaders charged with implementing them that will determine how much of the inevitable human suffering these storms cause can be avoided. The U.S. Government allowed Katrina to cause far greater harm than it should have. Unfortunately, there will be many opportunities in the future to demonstrate whether we can do better.

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