

Special Report

Administrative Breakdowns in the Governmental Response to Hurricane Katrina

“The bureaucracy has murdered people in the greater New Orleans area.”

—Aaron Broussard, president of Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, September 7, 2005

“Every one of those government levels could have done better.”

—Colorado governor Bill Owens, September 7, 2005

“What America needs are federal disaster relief people who actually know something about disaster relief.”

—*New York Times* editorial, September 9, 2005

“Every official at the Federal Emergency Management Agency should be fired, Director Michael Brown especially.”

—*Times-Picayune* editorial, September 4, 2005

These statements are an eloquent testimony to the widespread dissatisfaction with the early governmental response to Hurricane Katrina. Natural disasters such as Katrina are enormous, complex events that affect huge geographic areas and millions of people. It is extremely difficult for any organization, public or private, to deal with the diverse problems they cause. Nevertheless, governmental disaster response efforts usually work quite well (Schneider 1995). Therefore, it is important to determine why the system failed after Katrina’s onslaught.

It is too early, of course, to produce any definitive answers. But it does appear that some of the major problems encountered during the response to Katrina stemmed from breakdowns in the administrative elements of the governmental emergency management system. Effective bureaucratic agencies are characterized by well-established procedures, effective leadership, and clear objectives. An early assessment suggests that problems associated with all three of these bureaucratic characteristics weakened governmental efforts to respond quickly and effectively.

Faltering Mobilization

There is a fairly long-standing, well-established process for mobilizing the governmental response to natural disasters (Schneider 1995). This process works sequentially from the bottom up: It starts at the local level, works through the states, and passes on to the federal government. In the case of Katrina, the response began slowly, with a general feeling of uncertainty and inconsistency. In

Louisiana, local governmental units were overwhelmed with the magnitude of the disaster. Hence, they were unable to take the necessary first steps. The immediate result was chaos that erupted in New Orleans when the levees broke (Treaster and Sontag 2005).

Moving upward in the response process, Louisiana governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco did ask for additional resources from the federal government, but she refused to declare martial law or a state of emergency. The governor declined a proposal from the White House to put National Guard troops under the control of the federal government (Luo 2005). Public agencies were unable to stabilize local conditions or mobilize resources to get immediate assistance to disaster victims, thereby producing anomic conditions and a general breakdown of social order (Treaster 2005).

Turning to the higher levels, the federal government was initially unwilling to step in and take charge of the situation. Although a major disaster declaration was issued quickly, little concrete action took place during the period immediately following the hurricane. Three days after the flooding began in New Orleans, Mayor Ray Nagin issued a “desperate SOS to the federal government.” President Bush responded by pledging vast assistance, but he also asked people to be patient because the “recovery will take years” (McFadden and Blumenthal 2005). The federal government did mobilize troops and send additional supplies to the area. However, local conditions did not begin to stabilize until five days after the storm (Dao and Kleinfeld 2005). The delays, hesitation, and confusion exhibited by government officials at all levels exacerbated the pain, suffering, and frustration of disaster victims. As Representative Charles W. Boustany Jr. (R-LA) stated, “we needed direct federal assistance, command and control, and security—none of the three were present” (White and Whoriskey 2005). Thus, the failure to adhere to preestablished administrative procedures clearly impeded the response process during its critical early stages.

Personnel Problems

A hallmark of bureaucratic organization is specialization and expertise in areas of administrative responsibility (Rourke 1984).

*Saundra K. Schneider is a professor in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University, where she is also the associate chair and director of graduate studies. She is the author of *Flirting with Disaster: Public Management in Crisis Situations* (M. E. Sharpe, 1995). Her current research focuses on the role of administrative forces in public policy making, particularly in the areas of crisis management, health care, and welfare policy. She is conducting a study of the governmental response to natural disasters before and after September 11, 2001. E-mail: sks@msu.edu.*

But many critics have charged that top officials in the government's crisis management system are not qualified to handle major natural disasters ("Advance Men in Charge," September 9, 2005). President Bush has appointed two directors of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Joe M. Allbaugh served from 2001 to 2003, and Michael Brown has occupied the position since 2003. Neither of these men had any prior experience with crisis management or disaster relief (Bumiller 2005). Thus, it would be difficult to claim that they possess high levels of expertise in this field.

Recent public statements by prominent officials involved in the governmental response process have done little to convey an air of responsiveness, effectiveness, or competence. For example, FEMA director Brown and Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff both stated publicly that they had been unaware of the terrible conditions in New Orleans, even though the mass media had provided graphic and nearly continuous coverage for several days. Brown also remarked that the death toll in New Orleans was attributable to "people who did not heed evacuation warnings," even though many of the stranded citizens were simply unable to leave the city because they had no money, no transportation, and no place to go (White and Whoriskey 2005). Similarly, Secretary Chertoff described accounts of the heinous conditions in the New Orleans Convention Center as "nothing but rumors and anecdotes" ("After Katrina," September 1, 2005; Treaster 2005). At least at this stage in the response process, these individuals have not demonstrated strong and decisive leadership in crisis management. This lack of clear guidance has had immediate, detrimental consequences for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Cloudy Mission and Lack of Focus

Successful bureaucratic agencies possess a clear focus and explicitly stated mission objectives (Downs 1967). Unfortunately, that is not currently the case with FEMA, the primary unit of the federal government responsible for emergency relief. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the nation's entire emergency management system, including FEMA, shifted its focus away from natural disasters and toward the development of antiterrorism capabilities. The changing role of FEMA is clearly reflected in the statements of its leaders. For example, former FEMA director Allbaugh worked actively to reduce the federal government's involvement in natural disasters. He called federal disaster assistance an "oversized entitlement program," and he suggested that disaster victims should rely on "faith-based organizations" rather than the government for help (Lipton and Shane 2005). Public announcements such as these surely have created some ambiguity regarding FEMA's overall mission.

Major structural changes have also occurred. In 2003, FEMA was moved (along with 21 other agencies) into the newly created U.S. Department of Homeland Security. As a result, FEMA lost its status as an independent, cabinet-level agency. Instead, it became a small part of a large department with much broader objectives. Although FEMA still distributes federal preparedness grants to state and local governments, three-quarters of those grants are directed toward counterterrorism rather than natural disaster preparedness and response activities (White and Whoriskey 2005). Thus, an agency that once had a clear focus now faces a bifurcated set of objectives.

It is impossible to produce an authoritative answer to the question of what went wrong in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But so far, the governmental response evokes an unsettling feeling of déjà vu. Many of the problems and criticisms that emerged during late August and early September 2005 are identical to the concerns articulated about the governmental response to major disasters during the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as Hurricane Hugo, the Loma Prieta earthquake, and Hurricane Andrew (Schneider 1995). Perhaps there is some irony in the fact that as a result of these earlier charges leveled against the government, FEMA emerged as a particularly effective institution during the mid- and late-1990s. During that period, FEMA director James Lee Witt provided strong leadership, made extensive organizational changes, promoted the agency's relationships with external constituencies, and vastly improved the morale of FEMA employees (Witt 1993; "Advance Men in Charge," September 9, 2005). Unfortunately, the combination of factors outlined in this brief essay seem to have returned FEMA and the entire governmental response process to its earlier, weakened condition. The tragic consequences are clearly visible along the Gulf Coast of the United States.

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