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US Emergency Management: The Townsend Report and its Critics

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The White House recently released a report on the handling of Hurricane Katrina. The report, prepared by Francis Townsend, Bush's domestic security advisor made many recommendations for reform. Among them are:

- A greater partnership between federal, state and local governments in regards to emergency preparation and preparedness
- A larger role for the Pentagon and military forces, including active-duty forces, in the response to major disasters
- The need for a clear message to emergency workers with respect to which agency is in charge of response and decisions, particularly with respect to the provision of medical assistance
- The need for larger stockpiles of emergency supplies, along with an enhanced ability to track them.

Some other recommendations are to include the disabled, sick, and elderly in evacuation plans and to ensure that drills accurately test existing plans.² The standard National Guard forces were judged to be effective during the initial response but were insufficient for such a large-scale task with sustained operations. Fifty thousand more from all fifty states and D.C. were needed. Standard equipment between agencies should be used as the National Guard, the Army and Department of Homeland Security had issues with interoperability of their communication equipment not unlike what happened during 9/11 with the Police and Fire Department using different walkie-talkie wavelengths.³

Improving federal, state, and local coordination is clearly key, although there are differences of opinion with respect to how best to do this. Recently, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said the Federal Emergency Management Agency should not be considered the front line of defense in future disasters. He would leave it up to the state and local governments with FEMA playing a supporting role. He suggests putting a federal disaster

¹ I wish to thank Dr. Sawoski for his special editorial help with this paper.
³ Ibid.
coordinator in states who would report directly back to him. State emergency managers fear that part of the plan will create another level of bureaucracy to deal with in the midst of a disaster. The National Emergency Management Association, however, supports putting a federal disaster coordinator in high-risk states.4

The Townsend Report also highlights three overarching concerns or gaps that need to be addressed.

First, the government must implement a new “National Preparedness System” to make certain we have a completely seamless national response system that ensures cooperation and unity in preparing for and responding to natural and man-made disasters. The existing national preparedness system must be improved to minimize the impact of disasters on lives, property, and the economy. The existing system is said to be a maze of red tape and bureaucratic nightmares, therefore the new one should be more streamlined to eliminate delays and frustration. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security should focus more on increasing its capacity to direct the federal response effort while providing resources to emergency responders. An all-encompassing system, including all levels of government private sector, grass-roots, communities, and individuals, has to be formed that would allow for complete national preparedness in the case of a national disaster.5

Second, the U.S. needs to create a “culture of preparedness” that addresses the entire country, at all levels of government and community, along with the private sector and individual citizens. Everyone should share the goals and responsibilities for homeland security. To create the culture of preparedness, much effort and time will be needed. This is a long-term project and will not be completed soon. Initiative and innovation must be recognized and rewarded at all levels. Individuals must play a central role in preparing themselves and their families for emergencies. They must be able to take the initiative to evacuate or otherwise transport their families before emergencies. If an evacuation is mandatory, everyone must follow it or face certain dire consequences. Again, as part of this, federal, state, and local governments must work in

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partnership with each other and the private sector. Partnership between governments on all levels and the private sector are key for success.6

Third, the government must put into practice corrective actions to ensure we do not repeat the problems of Katrina. The report recommends several, relatively specific critical actions that should be put into place before the next hurricane season, a mere seven weeks from now. The most important ones are listed here.

- To ensure that federal, state, and local authority figures and decision makers work closely together in proximity to one another in the event of a disaster.
- To ensure awareness of the situation by forming “rapid deployable communications”.
- “Embed a single Department of Defense point of contact at the Federal Joint Field Office and FEMA regional offices to enhance coordination of military resources supporting the response”.
- “Identify and develop rosters of Federal, State, and local government personnel who are prepared to assist in disaster relief”.
-“Identify and develop rosters of Federal, State, and local government personnel who are prepared to assist in disaster relief”.
- “Enhance ongoing review of State evacuation plans and incorporate planning for Continuity of Government to ensure the continuation of essential and emergency services”.7

Criticism of the Townsend report has come from every side—and started before the report was released. At issue was whether or not the Federal Government could be impartial in its investigation. “The idea that anyone in the White House might produce a report that embarrasses the president or holds people accountable is just naïve,” one source told IPS.8

Indeed, several emergency response and preparedness experts agree that the Townsend Report is just a whitewash that will spare the White House from blame or at the very least direct most of it at the state and local authorities. “It is a waste of time and money when attention should be paid

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Fisher, William. “Critics Predict Katrina Whitewash”. Inter Press Service News Agency. (9/21/05).
to how to rectify such incompetence, which requires an independent assessment," said one of them.9

The Congressionally-funded Government Accountability Office (GAO) released its own report also more critical of the federal government than the Townsend Report. GAO’s report, in particular, castigated the administration for not establishing “a clear chain of command for domestic emergency; [the administration] disregarded early warnings of a Category 5 hurricane inundating New Orleans and southeast Louisiana; and did not ensure that cities and states had adequate plans and training before the Aug. 29 storm”.10

The Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) own, independent Office of the Inspector General released a report on April 14, 2006 more critical than the Townsend Report of the DHS’s preparations for a natural disaster of Katrina’s magnitude, “The federal government, and FEMA in particular, has received widespread criticism for a slow and ineffective response to Hurricane Katrina,” the report concludes. "Much of the criticism is warranted."11 The report also directly criticized Chertoff’s plan for FEMA to assist overwhelmed states during a disaster as “insufficient for an event of Hurricane Katrina’s magnitude.”12 The DHS Inspector General’s report highlighted some thirty-eight additional, detailed recommendations that would call for “better training, coordination and systems for ensuring communications among local and state emergency responders and between federal agencies providing aid. They also call for more clearly defined roles and an established chain of command within the federal government”.13

Representative Tom Davis, R-Va., has aptly summed up charges that the government was simply not prepared for a storm of this magnitude: "The director ... of the National Hurricane Center said this was the big one," Davis said, but "when this happened ... Bush is in Texas. Card is in Maine. The vice president is fly-fishing. I mean, who's in charge here?”14

9 Ibid.
10 Goldstein, Amy and Hsu, Spencer. “Scalding criticism of administration's Katrina response GAO report blames leaders at the top for a host of missteps”. Washington Post. (2/2/06).
11 Internal Report Urges Changes After Katrina” Associated Press. (4/14/06).
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Goldstein and Hsu. “Scalding criticism of administration's Katrina response GAO report blames leaders at the top for a host of missteps”.

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What these separate reports and criticisms indicate is that the government needs to have a fully independent investigation about what went wrong with the Katrina response; one that is not controlled by the Administration. Most importantly, there needs to be one clear and authoritative set of recommendations for avoiding such emergency management breakdowns in the future.

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