

TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2006

LIEBERMAN SAYS DEVASTATION OF KATRINA WAS PREDICTED “OVER AND OVER AGAIN”

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., delivered the following statement today at the Committee’s opening round of investigative hearings.

Thank you Madam Chairman. Today we begin an intensified series of hearings that will continue over the next three weeks into government’s preparations before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29 of last year – and government’s response in the hours, days, weeks and now months that followed. The title of today’s hearing is “Preparing for a Catastrophe: The Hurricane Pam Exercise.” “Preparing for Catastrophe.” The phrase makes a mournful sound when said against the backdrop of the misery and destruction the world saw on television last year and that members of this committee still saw last week when we toured the Gulf Coast. Katrina was a very powerful storm, but it would have caused much less misery and destruction had we prepared for it better. This August 30th headline in the New Orleans Times-Picayune says it all: “Katrina: The Storm We’ve Always Feared.” The storm we’ve always feared! The storm people knew would hit one day. The storm they actually practiced for in the Hurricane Pam exercise during 2004 that is the topic of this hearing. In the 10 committee hearings on Katrina we have already held, in our staff interviews of more than 200 witnesses, in our review of tens of thousands of documents, we have already learned enough to be not just disappointed, but infuriated by the poor performance of all levels of government in Katrina. These conclusions should compel us to achieve top-to-bottom reform of the way we prepare for and respond to disasters. Katrina was not just predictable. It was predicted over and over again. As the FEMA Coordinator for

the Hurricane Pam exercise told our investigative staff last Friday, Katrina was a “replication” of Pam. And Pam itself was staged in response to the flooding in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1998, caused by Hurricane Georges that made state and local officials of the Gulf Coast realize they could be overwhelmed if and when “the big one” hit. The Hurricane Pam exercise in the spring and summer of 2004, actually and eerily predicted the emergency response crises and devastation that occurred last August and September, when Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Today we will hear from four witnesses who participated in the Hurricane Pam exercise who will tell us that the problems we saw last August and September were known long before Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and even long before Pam predicted them. The fictional hurricane of the Pam exercise was a slow moving Category 3 hurricane, quite similar to Hurricane Katrina, except that in the fictional exercise, Pam hit New Orleans directly and Katrina ultimately blew about 15 miles to the east of the city. Had Katrina hit New Orleans dead on, the Pam exercise predicted 67,000 deaths. That gives us some idea of how much more catastrophic Katrina could have been and how urgent disaster preparations should have been. The Pam exercise also put state and local governments, and FEMA and its parent, the Department of Homeland Security, on notice that the people of New Orleans would experience exactly the problems that we all witnessed with anguish last August and early September, including: The inability to evacuate 100,000 people, who were left behind in the City after landfall; The desperate and horrific problems at the Superdome; The breakdown in the supply chain; The over-reliance on too few to accomplish search and rescue missions with inadequate equipment; The inability of leaders at every level of government to maintain accurate and current situational awareness. The Hurricane Pam exercise also predicted widespread flooding throughout New Orleans, hospitals and nursing homes under water, hundreds of thousands of people displaced, and local first responders incapacitated. The Pam exercise gave DHS and FEMA explicit notice that state and local governments would be overwhelmed when New Orleans got hit with a catastrophic hurricane, and that comprehensive federal assistance would be necessary. But despite these dire warnings from Pam, preparations for Katrina were shockingly poor. Two to three days before Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, it became clear that it would be catastrophic. In fact, as Katrina approached the Gulf Coast two days before landfall – Saturday, August 27 – FEMA issued a briefing document at 9 a.m. declaring that the Pam “Exercise projection is exceeded by Hurricane Katrina real life impacts.” The failure to heed the fictional Pam’s many warnings compounded the tragedy when Katrina hit in real time and with full fury. That is the sad story our committee’s hearings will tell in detail in the three weeks ahead. Before closing, and as we embark on this stage of the investigation, I feel compelled to say a few words about the conduct of this investigation. First, I

want to thank Chairman Collins and her staff for working with me and my staff to conduct an aggressive and thoroughly bi-partisan investigation. This has been our norm on the Committee and I don't want the Chairman to think I take it for granted. We have worked together as all investigative committees should, without partisan division and with a united view that our goal is to uncover what happened with respect to Hurricane Katrina so we can make sure our government is much better prepared the next time disaster strikes.

Unfortunately, though, I cannot give the same high marks to the Executive branch for its response to our investigation. The problems begin at the White House, where there has been a near total lack of cooperation that has made it impossible, in my opinion, for us to do the thorough investigation we have a responsibility to do. Why does this matter? Here is an example: The Committee has found that on the evening before Katrina made landfall, DHS circulated to federal agencies sitting in the Homeland Security Operations Center a report that the storm had been upgraded to Category 5 and that: "Any storm rated Category 4 or greater . . . will likely lead to severe flooding and/or levee breaching. This could leave the New Orleans metro area submerged for weeks or months." The White House received this report at 1:47 a.m. on Monday – several hours before Katrina made landfall. What happened to that report? Why was the President left so uninformed that he said four days later: "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." At this point we can't answer that critical question because the White House has produced just a very small portion of the documents we requested. They have opposed efforts to interview their personnel. And they have hindered our ability to obtain information from other federal agencies regarding White House actions in response to Katrina. Almost every question our staff has asked federal agency witnesses regarding conversations with, or involvement of, the White House has been met with a response that they could not answer on direction of the White House. There's been no assertion of executive privilege; just a refusal to answer. Indeed, at yesterday's staff interview of former FEMA Director Michael Brown, agency lawyers advised Mr. Brown not to say whether he spoke to the President or the Vice President, or comment on the substance of conversations he had with any other high level White House officials. This assertion of a kind of virtual immunity for the White House from inquiry has frustrated our Committee's ability to learn – and tell – the full story of Katrina and it is unacceptable. While some agencies, like FEMA and the United States Coast Guard have been cooperative, a number of other executive agencies – including the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services – essentially ignored our document and information requests for months and to this day have produced much less than half the information we asked for. HHS has not produced a single requested witness for an interview. The Department of Homeland Security, which is at the

center of our investigation because it has overall responsibility for national disaster preparedness and response, has produced too little, too late. Repeated requests for critical witnesses and documents have been ignored or delayed. It took until two weeks ago for DHS to give us a single witness the Committee requested outside of FEMA or the Coast Guard to interview. My staff believes that DHS has engaged in a conscious strategy of slow walking our investigation in the hope that we would run out of time to follow the investigation's natural progression to where it leads. At this point, I cannot disagree. I hope the Committee will continue to pursue all these unanswered questions asked of the Executive branch until we have the information to answer the questions that must be answered. In the meantime, because hurricane season begins again in June and the threat of a terrorist attack persists, these hearings must go forward and the Committee's report must be written with a sense of urgency to help America's government be better prepared to protect America's people from disasters – natural or unnatural – history tells us will come. In that spirit, I look forward to today's witnesses and those that will follow in the three weeks ahead.