

**SENATOR BARBARA A. MIKULSKI
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**HURRICANE KATRINA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM
MARCH 8, 2006**

Introduction

Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Lieberman, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. I appreciate the rigorous work the Committee has done to investigate the government's response to Hurricane Katrina and your ongoing commitment to reform.

Now is the time to reform. I was asked to testify to discuss the great urgency for reform, the institutional history and my observations on lessons learned. From 1987 until last year, I was Chair or Ranking Member of the VA-HUD and Independent Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee – FEMA was in its jurisdiction. Working on a bipartisan basis, we reformed FEMA – transforming it from a relic of the Cold War into a professional, prepared, all hazards agency.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina was the storm we all feared. In the hours and days after Hurricane Katrina, I watched in disbelief and absolute frustration at the federal government's befuddled and boondoggled response. They blew it. The people in our Gulf Coast states were victimized twice – first by the hurricane, second by the slow and sluggish response of our government. This was similar, although on a much larger scale, to the incompetence of the federal government 15 years earlier during the government's response to Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew.

Personal History with FEMA

I became chair of the VA-HUD Subcommittee in 1989. I was very frustrated with FEMA: a cold war agency that was out of date, out of touch and riddled with political hacks. Sound familiar?

In 1989, the Wall was coming down in Berlin, but not in the FEMA bureaucracy. FEMA was run like a cold war agency, focused on continuity of operations of the federal government in the event of a nuclear attack. It was a joke. This philosophy was largely developed during the Reagan Administration when the focus was on the Soviet Union and the build-up of our defense in the 1980s.

Then, America was hit by a series of natural disasters. In 1989, Hurricane Hugo devastated large portions of the Carolinas. FEMA's response was very poor. The military had to intervene to get power back up in Charleston, South Carolina after people went for more than a week without basic functions. Senator Hollings had to call President Bush's Chief of Staff, John Sununu, who in turn had to get the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Colin Powell, just to get generators shipped in.

Then came Hurricane Andrew. Andrew, like Katrina, did not catch us by surprise. The National Hurricane Center began tracking the storm nearly a week before it made landfall. Yet FEMA's response was so bad that Andy Card, then Secretary of Transportation, told the White House that every political appointee at FEMA should be fired because they were not up to the task. Three days after Andrew made landfall, most of us will remember the director of Dade County's Office of Emergency Management, Kate Hale, asked whoever would listen: "Where the hell is the cavalry on this one? We need food. We need water. We need people. For God's sake, where are they?"

Reforming FEMA:

So the VA-HUD Subcommittee worked to reform FEMA. First, I worked with my Ranking Member – and treasured colleague – Senator Jake Garn. Later I worked with Senator Bond to change an agency that was focused on Cold War threats and was riddled with cronyism.

In 1993, we commissioned three organizations to help us do a top to bottom review of FEMA: the General Accounting Office, the National Academy of Public Administration and FEMA's own IG. Each reviewed FEMA's mission and effectiveness. Based on these reports, we began our reforms.

My goals for FEMA were:

1. A professional director and a professional staff: I pressed for FEMA to be run by emergency management professionals who had real world experience. That meant either a civilian involved in emergency management like James Lee Witt or retired military or someone with state experience like Joe Allbaugh.
2. A risk-based agency: prepared for the risks Americans are most likely to face: the terrible natural disasters, a hurricane in the Gulf Coast or East Coast, tornados or flooding in the Midwest or an earthquake in California.
3. An all-hazards agency: prepared to respond to any hazard: a fire in a tunnel in Baltimore, a hazardous chemical spill, a hurricane and today, it also means a terrorist attack or other predatory action against our nation.

To achieve this – we emphasized the three Rs:

1. Readiness, meaning the preparation and training before a disaster
2. Response, or the surge capacity needed with proper logistical systems in place once a disaster hits
3. Recovery, or an organized effort to rebuild the communities devastated by disasters

It took time, money, and bipartisan cooperation but we accomplished real change.

In 2000, a tiptop FEMA was turned over to the Bush Two Administration. President Bush appointed Joe Allbaugh to head FEMA and he continued the legacy of reform. In 2002, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, FEMA was moved into the Department of Homeland Security. I voted for that change, but FEMA has lost its way.

My Recommendations:

First, FEMA must again become an independent agency to ensure accountability and a direct path to the President. Second, the President should name a professional Director of FEMA, not a temp. Third, I recommend you review the reports that we did in the 1990's for the lessons learned during our previous reforms.

Conclusion

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to working with you to reform FEMA. Let's get in the right leadership then let's work with the right resources. And let's do it in a spirit of cooperation. Let's make FEMA an independent agency, an all-hazards, professionally run, independent agency, responsible to the call of the Commander in Chief and to the American people.