

THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2006

LIEBERMAN SAYS KATRINA REPORT SHOULD BE PRIMER FOR FUTURE DISASTERS

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., delivered the following statement Thursday as he and Committee Chairman Susan Collins, R-Me., released proposed findings and recommendations from their seven month Hurricane Katrina investigation.

Thanks very much, Senator Collins. Madam Chairman, I'm very proud to be standing with you today to announce that we have agreed on this report, findings and a series of recommendations that we will make to our full committee next Tuesday. This has been an enormous undertaking, and I believe the report and the findings and the recommendations represent an enormous accomplishment in response to an enormous catastrophe. Thanks to Senator Collins' leadership, once again, this investigation and the drafting of the report itself were bipartisan — in fact, nonpolitical. And that allowed our staffs to come together and work as one — the two of us and our committee members to come together and work as one, across party lines, to deal with an unprecedented disaster, catastrophe, in American life, and the obvious failure of our government to prepare for and respond adequately to it. It is on the basis of the facts that this nonpolitical investigation found that we present what I believe are hard-hitting findings and constructive and progressive recommendations. And I thank you, Madam Chairman, again for the leadership that you have shown, and to say to you again how grateful I am for our working partnership in this and so many other activities. I believe this is the most complete analysis yet of what occurred prior to, during and after the most serious natural disaster in America in a century — and the

first disaster that tested all levels of our government since September 11th. Clearly, all levels of our government failed that test. We've established four overarching causes for government's widespread failures before and after Katrina. One, for years, government officials at all levels — federal, state and local — neglected their duties to prepare for a forewarned catastrophe. We've called our report, "A Nation Still Unprepared." In this case, we could say: Hurricane Katrina, a nation forewarned and still unprepared. Second, government officials at all levels failed to realize that Katrina was a catastrophe, as it took shape and hit — not a conventional hurricane. Third, they did little or actually did wrong, made poor decisions in the days before landfall, which inevitably doomed the post-landfall response. And fourth, the absence of effective leadership at all levels of government foreclosed the possibility of overcoming the previous lack of preparedness. These failures of leadership and government cost lives and multiplied the anguish of the storm's survivors. Despite the warnings that I have referred to, the federal government, the state of Louisiana, the city of New Orleans failed to prepare for and respond to the predicted flooding that, in fact, did trap tens of thousands of New Orleans residents. This lack of preparation was a gross dereliction of duty on the part of nearly all the agencies responsible for ensuring the safety of the people of the Gulf Coast, and New Orleans in particular. Starting at the top, the White House was told long before Katrina that FEMA did not have the capability to handle a catastrophe of this kind, but failed to adequately address that shortcoming. Despite the clear warnings before landfall that Katrina would be catastrophic, the president and the White House were not sufficiently engaged when they should have been initiating an aggressive response. Although the president and the White House were following events after landfall, they still seemed surprisingly detached until two days later, when they began to marshal the full resources of the federal government. Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff and the department he led lacked a basic understanding of the federal government's blueprint for responding to a catastrophe, a disaster just like Katrina, which is the National Response Plan and, in fact, hadn't even assigned some of DHS's response obligations to any one in the department before Katrina hit. On the days leading to landfall, neither Secretary Chertoff nor his top aides carried a clear sense of urgency, and thereby lost precious time in readying themselves and the government's resources to respond to almost certain disaster. On the day of landfall, the department's Homeland Security Operations Center, the central federal agency for monitoring and distributing information in a time of crisis — natural or terrorist — failed miserably, inexplicably and infuriatingly by failing to put together the overwhelming evidence before it to understand what was happening and communicate the catastrophic dimensions of what was occurring in New Orleans to key decision-makers, including the president of the

United States. The delays in the federal response that resulted likely increased Katrina's death toll and assuredly compounded the suffering of her victims. FEMA Director Michael Brown claimed to understand Katrina's danger the weekend before landfall, but his leadership did not reflect it. In fact, his leadership simply failed to rise to the challenge of Katrina or the mandate and responsibility that his office gave him. He was presiding over an agency weakened by a 15 percent vacancy rate for over a year and senior political management largely without emergency management experience. That hurt during this catastrophe. The agency failed to train and equip staff for likely operations. It failed to arrange adequate contracts in advance to transport necessary commodities. And it failed to preposition communications equipment — a critical oversight. The agency even failed to use the assets that were available in the area, dispatching too few emergency response teams to the region too late. At the state and local level, Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin equally failed to prepare and to coordinate and deploy available state and local resources that needed to be there for Hurricane Katrina. Most egregiously, for each of us, there are a parts of this story that, as we gathered the facts of this story, were increasing infuriating, the city and state failed to arrange transportation for the 100,000 people in New Orleans who they were forewarned would be unable or unwilling to evacuate themselves. Louisiana was simply not adequately prepared to take care of the old, sick, and incapacitated under the catastrophic conditions they were long warned would come with a hurricane like Katrina. The pivotal failures of the months and days leading up to the storm might, as I have said been less if effective leadership, at all levels of government, in the days before and after the crisis, had there to inspire and drive a more aggressive, efficient, and comprehensive response. That was not the case for the City of New Orleans, the State of Louisiana, or the federal government of the United States. In national catastrophes, the nation does look to the President, who is uniquely charged and powered to lead our country's response to a catastrophe of Katrina's magnitude. President Bush won our admiration and gratitude for the way he took charge in responding to the attacks against America of September 11th. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, he failed to provide that same presidential leadership when it was needed, and America suffered. The report Senator Collins and I will propose to the Committee recounts therefore a double tragedy of epic proportions – a tragedy caused by nature and another tragedy compounded by human folly and failures of leadership. These conclusions come from the facts which are painstakingly detailed in a report that we will present to our Committee. Senator Collins and I are of like mind and expression on all elements of this report, but there are three on which I have chosen to provide additional views. One is on the question of who is responsible for most of the failures of unified command. The Second is on the role of the

White House and the President in events surrounding Katrina, and the level of cooperation of the White House to the Committee on this investigation.

Therefore, I will submit additional views on these three matters. In too many instances, they came to see our investigation as a nuisance and their response as discretionary. The worst offender was one that should have stood above the fray and worked hardest with the Committee to uncover the government's failings in Katrina: the White House. The President stated early on that – quote – “Congress also has an important oversight function to perform” and he said – quoting again – “I will work with members of both parties to make sure this effort is thorough.” End of quote. The fact, in my opinion, is our Committee faced a White House less willing to cooperate with this Senate investigation than any other I have witnessed in my 18 years as a Senator. As a result, I believe the White House wrongly deprived the Committee and the American people of the ability to fully assess the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina. On the critical question of the White House role in preparing for and responding to this catastrophe, how then do we assess, since there was not full cooperation in answering our questions from the White House. But based on the information we were able to obtain and based on what we all saw, and as you read the report, you will see it is very comprehensive, with new records of information on the White House, about the gathering storm, and the impact it had on August 29, 2005. I have written in my additional views about what I think are the two critical roles of the President in a crisis, and the same could be said, but in a lesser way, because of the lesser offices, of the Governor and Mayor. The first is to assume control, marshal the resources at your command and direct them to respond with a sense of urgency and effectiveness to the crisis. The second is what might be called the symbolic, but critically important role, of leadership, which is to be visible, to be present at the helm, to reassure the people who are directly affected by the crisis, and, in fact, the country as a whole, that the government is responding and there is reason for confidence and hope. At each level of government, there was a failure of leadership in both of these areas and it had consequences, disastrous consequences, for the victims of this storm. I would say that at the federal level, and at the other levels, that the President, the Governor, Mayor, each, as chief executives must be held accountable for the failures in the response to the storm and must be reminded that they have the authority to hold others under them accountable for failures in the crisis. Let me just say a final and brief word about our recommendations. The records we've compiled, the findings, show that things can not go on. The ultimate value of the report, in my opinion, will be what is done in reaction to it. And I want to suggest two possible courses of response that I hope will happen. The first is that I think that this report is a primer for all in our government of how they should act in a crisis, to see what should have been done and what was not done. Look at the

few cases, the Coast Guard, for instance, where what was done was exemplary, and to adjust their conduct and planning based on the reading of that primary. I'd like to believe that this report will be required throughout all levels of government and emergency response and preparedness, from City Hall in New Orleans to the Oval Office in the White House. The second is specific recommendations and I simply want to endorse and embrace what Senator Collins said about FEMA and the National Preparedness and Response Authority. The fact is that some times an organization, private or public, become so disreputable, beyond repair, that you need to dissolve it. And that is the conclusion that we've come to on FEMA. It is a sick organization and it has totally lost the confidence of the people of America, who it was created to protect in a time of crisis. So our recommendation is to dissolve FEMA, clear the table, and begin anew, fresh. And we've asked ourselves, what can we best do to organize the extraordinary resources of the federal government of the United States to prepare for, mitigate and respond, oversee the recovery from disasters, and particularly the catastrophes that are beyond the resources of state and local governments. And that's why we've proposed this National Preparedness and Response Authority. It will be a strong, powerful, and a distinct entity within the Department of Homeland Security, reporting in time of crisis to the President. We think we are recommending the structure that America needs to be prepared and to be protected. Ultimately, its effectiveness will depend on the quality of the people who are put in key positions in this new authority and that's where we intend to place some minimal requirements in the statute that people put in these critical positions the experience and ability that gives us confidence that they will be ready to do their jobs in a catastrophe as damaging as Hurricane Katrina was.