

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2006

SENATORS COLLINS & LIEBERMAN URGE PRESIDENT BUSH TO BROADEN AUTHORITY OF FEDERAL COORDINATOR FOR HURRICANE KATRINA RECOVERY

Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), the Chairman and Ranking Member respectively of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, today wrote a letter to President Bush urging him to broaden the existing authority of the Federal Coordinator for the Recovery and Rebuilding of the Gulf Coast Region. Senators Collins and Lieberman say, given the enormity of the recovery and reconstruction needed along the coast and the number of agencies involved, that the Federal Coordinator, Donald Powell, should have a central role not just in coordinating and communicating federal policy, but also in ensuring its proper implementation. They say Powell needs authority to tailor bureaucratic procedures to the pressing realities on the gulf coast. Powell recently told Committee investigators that, "I am the

President's eyes and ears but not his arms." Senators Collins and Lieberman are leading the Senate investigation into the government's preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. To date, they have held 15 Committee hearings to examine the issue and are expected to hold several more before the end of the month.

In addition to Senators Collins and Lieberman, Senators Norm Coleman (R-MN), Tom Coburn (R-OK), and David Vitter (R-LA) also signed the letter. The following is the text of the letter to President Bush:

Dear Mr. President:

As part of its ongoing examination into the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs held a field hearing in Gulfport, Mississippi and toured New Orleans on January 17, 2006. The Committee received testimony at the hearing from Donald Powell, the Federal Coordinator for the Recovery and Rebuilding of the Gulf Coast Region. Based on what we heard from Mr. Powell and others at the hearing, as well as the devastation the Committee witnessed first hand throughout the Gulf Coast, we are writing to urge you to broaden the Federal Coordinator's authority so that he might more effectively direct the federal government's reconstruction and rebuilding activities.

It is clear that in scope and complexity, the task of rebuilding the Gulf Coast remains staggering. The destruction caused by Katrina has created what many believe to be the worst humanitarian crisis in our country since the Great Depression. Some progress has been made in removing debris, returning basic services to local communities, and providing short term assistance to residents. Yet the job of longer-term reconstruction has barely begun. Entire communities remain completely destroyed more than five months after the storm. In many areas there is little sign of rebuilding, and enormous piles of debris continue to slow these efforts.

While local officials expressed gratitude for the public and private aid that has come from so many quarters, they also described mounting frustration with bureaucracy and delay regarding a range of federal programs crucial to rebuilding. They told us of difficulty in understanding and accessing many such programs and of decision-making that seems needlessly complex and delayed. As the mayor of Bay St. Louis succinctly put it, "Life is already too complicated for those in need." With their futures uncertain, some residents of the Gulf Coast are losing hope.

Given the enormity of the task and the many agencies involved at all levels of government, we support strengthening the authority of the Federal Coordinator to oversee the federal government's role in rebuilding the Gulf Coast region. Your executive order establishing the Federal Coordinator office provides that it is the "policy of the United States to provide effective, integrated, and fiscally responsible support from across the Federal Government to support . . . recovery and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast region. . . ." It states that the first function of the Federal Coordinator is "to ensure the proper implementation" of that policy. The executive order thus appears to recognize, and properly so in our view, that the Federal Coordinator should have a central role not just in coordinating and communicating federal policy, but also in its implementation.

Our concern is that the Federal Coordinator lacks adequate authority to accomplish the policy stated. We have no doubt that Mr. Powell brings commitment and sound fiscal and managerial experience to the position. We also know he has your confidence. The problem is that he appears to have little real authority to drive policy or to require federal agencies to tailor bureaucratic processes to the pressing realities of the Gulf Coast region. The relevant agencies shall "respond promptly" to the Federal Coordinator's requests and "provide information" and "cooperate" with him, but his authority over them goes no further. As Mr. Powell recounted, the Federal Coordinator can gather information, put together proposals, and identify shortcomings, but he cannot force agencies to streamline wasteful, time-consuming contracting practices nor require the harmonization of programs among federal agencies that may be working at cross purposes. As Mr. Powell aptly summarized it, "I am the President's eyes and ears but not his arms." Months after the storm, it should be apparent that this arrangement is not adequate given the enormous tasks at hand.

We urge you to broaden the Federal Coordinator's authority over federal agencies so that he may carry out his reconstruction duties more effectively and thereby improve the federal government's overall response in the Gulf Coast. We encourage you to do so as promptly as possible, given the pressing nature of the task ahead.