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Press Briefing by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism

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James S. Brady Briefing Room

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MS. TOWNSEND: The President's most solemn obligation is to protect the American people. Every day and night millions of men and women in the federal government, both military and civilian, work to achieve that objective. Given the dangerous world we live in, they do an outstanding job. Despite all we do, however, Hurricane Katrina was a deadly reminder that we can, and will, do better.

This is the first and foremost lesson we learned from the death and destruction caused by the country's most destructive natural disaster. No matter how prepared we think we are, we must work to improve our performance every day.

When you look at prior natural disasters -- and I direct you to pages 6 and 7 of the report, which are graphs that really make the comparison -- the scope of the devastation, the size of the disaster area was extraordinary. The second lesson we learned, and we hope everyone listening today will learn, is that it will take all of us working together to put our country in the best position to be prepared for, to defend against, to respond to, and to recover from future natural disasters or terrorist attacks. And I really do mean all of us. It will require not only federal, state and local governments, it will require schools and churches, individual citizens, communities, workplaces all across our nation.

Those of us in government must take the lead, and President Bush made clear he is doing just that. Like all Americans, he was not satisfied with the federal response to Hurricane Katrina and he accepted responsibility for the shortcomings in the federal response. He demanded that we find out the lessons, that we learn them and that we fix the problems, that we take every action to make sure America is safer, stronger and better prepared. That, ladies and gentlemen, is what this Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned Review has been all about.

Before moving on to the lessons -- the 17 lessons learned, before talking in greater detail about what went wrong -- and as you know, much did -- I must say for a moment, I'd like to speak about what went right. In Appendix B of the report, we go through in some detail, particularly state and local efforts. There were thousands of lives saved by the United States Coast Guard and the United States military, and they put their own lives at great risk to save others stranded on rooftops, to rescue them in boats, and otherwise to bring them to safety.

The Coast Guard alone rescued or evacuated over 33,000 people, which is over six times the number that they do in an average year. Volunteers, charities and other non-governmental organizations were outstanding partners, and we need to treat them as the valued partners that they are.

In addition to ground operations, a joint Homeland Security, Transportation, and Department of Defense airlift successfully evacuated over 24,000 people, constituting the largest domestic civilian airlift on U.S. soil in our

history.

So the much that did go right, the President has made clear we will build on and we will duplicate it in the future. But now let us turn to the lessons learned.

In any emergency there is a before, a during, and an after, and we've got a lot of work to do in all three areas. In total, we've identified 125 specific recommendations in 17 general categories that -- and these 17 categories, by and large, fall into each of the three phases of a response.

First, preparation and planning before. Our National Response Plan is a 600-page government document, complete with organization charts, procedures, rules of engagement, annexes, and enough government acronyms and jargon to make your head spin. The answer is, I know a lot of work went into the NRP -- the National Response Plan -- and I know that it was well-intentioned. The fact is it didn't measure up. In the response to Hurricane Katrina, the National Response Plan came up short.

Unfortunately, the one thing that the government tends to be best at is red tape, but what we know is when we're fighting a deadly hurricane or a terrorist threat, red tape can no longer be tolerated or accepted. So we need to rewrite the National Response Plan so it is workable and it is clear. We will require officials at all levels to become familiar with it. We will draw from the expertise at the state and local levels to ensure that we get it right. And we must exercise it before the next event.

We will train personnel like we do in the military, through the creation of a new national Homeland Security university, based on the successful model of the National Defense University. And part of this planning must involve better lessons learned, both internally to the federal government in all of our operating agencies and departments, as well as from the private sector.

We heard time and again from the private sector that plans to protect and restart power plants and other critical infrastructure was woefully inadequate. We also learned from the private sector that they have state-of-the-art systems in supply chain management, inventory tracking, and real-time delivery of commodities. We will work with them on all of these. FedEx can track a package anywhere in the world, real-time. FEMA should be able to do the same thing for ice, water and food.

Evacuation. President Bush publicly urged evacuation of the region, and many people who heard and could evacuate did follow that urging. But not enough people heard the call, or had the means to evacuate. Evacuation is primarily a responsibility of state and local governments, but in events like Katrina, and those where resources at the state and local level are overwhelmed, the federal government must be in a position to ensure people are moved to safety.

We must work with state and local governments to ensure that evacuation plans work. And DHS has already begun that process. Those plans must especially include accommodating the ill, the elderly, and the disabled, those who may require additional assistance on the part of state, local, or federal government.

Ultimately, evacuations will only work if people are aware of them and they follow the evacuation orders, which leads me to public communications. One stunning fact that we learned during the course of the lessons learned review was that the emergency alert system -- the old system that most of us are familiar with is the Emergency Broadcast System, that sound on your television when the screen goes black -- was not activated in a fulsome way, as fully as it could have been, prior to landfall. The National Hurricane Center did a magnificent job in trying to communicate the urgency of the threat, but we didn't use the public communications that we had available in the emergency alert system to the extent that we could have, and should have. We need to look at 21st century technology and utilizing that to better communicate with the American people, whether that means using cell phones, pagers, and satellite TV and radio.

The second category during a crisis is response to the actual event. One of the most important lessons that was learned was the departments and agencies with the response mission had real problems obtaining situational awareness -- military-speak for knowing exactly what is going on, where it is going on, and when it is going on.

Every decision made in an emergency can only be as good as the information you have at the time. In the fog of war and confusion in the early hours of this event was an issue.

To address this we will develop a more comprehensive national emergency communications system that ensures survivability, operability, and interoperability. We will be ready to employ all federal communications capabilities for major events, and have more redundancy in our communications systems. We will have more equipment -- more satellite phones, more radios, and more ways to get the information we need to make critically important decisions.

We found during the course of the lessons learned that we had not utilized all the federal assets that we had available to us. We need to understand what's available; we need to be able to deploy it effectively so that we can make the best possible decisions for the American people.

There were two missions that worked well that would benefit from more and a better integrated and more comprehensive system of deployment. One was search and rescue; the other were public health and the national disaster medical teams. In both instances, these first responders were real heroes of Hurricane Katrina. But in both instances, we owe them a more integrated system that deploys them effectively with the supplies they need, and so that when you drop off a rescued victim you do something better for them than merely taking them to high, dry ground, but you're taking them to a place where they can get the attention that they need from officials.

A mission which needs improvement was ensuring law enforcement and security, both during and immediately after the event. Local law enforcement officials were overwhelmed by the storm and many, in fact, were victimized by it. While the National Response Plan called for federal law enforcement capabilities to be available to backfill that vacuum, the response was slow and disjointed.

One key recommendation is that the Attorney General take the lead in fixing this problem, and put in place a deputization process so federal officials can immediately be deployed, so that we know what federal law enforcement assets are available, and that we have the capacity to surge them. This isn't the first place that state and local officials will go when they need law enforcement backup; this is, again, primarily a state and local responsibility. But when they're overwhelmed, they have neighbors and National Guard to look to for state and local law enforcement assistance, and then the federal government needs to have a plan, to understand what surge capability we have, and efficiently and effectively surge it to the disaster area.

Finally, we need a better structure at the White House to ensure that all aspects of the response are moving forward, a process to cut through the red tape and to referee any needless disputes that arise in the heat of an emergency. Under the auspices of the Homeland Security Council, we will form the Disaster Response Group, which I will personally oversee. The Disaster Response Group will be very much modeled along the same type of a group that we have that deals with terrorism threats and responses in the Counter-Terrorism Security Group.

In the end, we must do a much better job at preparation, at planning, and improve our response. But even if these all go flawlessly, people will still need help in the wake of a crisis, so recovery is critical. First and foremost is human services. This includes creating a truly integrated one-stop assistance process that is disaster-victim oriented. The federal government needs to organize and deploy itself to meet the needs of our citizens in their hour of crisis, not to have several locations where individual victims must go to seek the assistance that the government can provide. It includes setting up voluntary registry for people so that they can access -- they have a place to store personal information that they can access, should important documents be unavailable to them.

Key to this is public health and medical support. And while I said that this was an example of success, many people were treated by emergency public health officials, we need a system of vast deployment with supplies. And Secretary Leavitt already has a process underway to address this need.

People who evacuate must have someplace to go that is safe for themselves and for their families, which is why housing and sheltering are so important. You have heard in recent days Secretary Chertoff talk about working with the American Red Cross to have a system of registration at shelters so we can track people when they move

between shelters or out of shelters, so we can facilitate their receiving of benefits that they require, or assistance, and that we can use it to reunite separated family members.

On housing, we did not maximize and leverage the expertise of the Housing and Urban Development Department to the extent we might have. HUD has got great expertise in public housing, but we did not have an inventory of federal housing assets that were available and that the federal government owns. That's not good enough. Katrina was rare because it was the biggest dislocation of Americans since the Dust Bowl. But we have to be better prepared. A dirty bomb, a pandemic, or other unfortunate, but potential threat would bring similar challenges in housing, and we have to be ready. We have to know what federal housing assets and stock are available; we have to make those options available to the victims.

Fortunately, we were blessed by the true spirit of America through volunteer and charitable organizations, which will continue to play an enormous role in this area. But even then, their efforts were burdened by confusion and no clear direction from the government on where they could be most effective. We have already begun discussions with charitable organizations, faith-based groups, and will ensure that they get the best information in the most direct fashion, hopefully from one person. We look to state and local partners and their best practices in this area.

In the states of Florida and North Carolina, they have volunteer coordinators in their state emergency operations center, and this has proven to be a very effective tool in coordinating volunteer efforts.

Finally, there is debris cleanup. We can, and will, do more contracting before the disaster to do a better job and facilitate the quick removal of debris immediately following disaster. Too often we heard the frustrations of governors and mayors that the slowness in debris removal inhibits the sense and the speed of recovery.

Let me close with two important and overriding challenges that we face going forward. One which you've heard is the proper role of the military, and the second is the overall transformation of our national preparedness capability. In truly catastrophic events, state and locals may be incapacitated or overwhelmed, or even worse. The fact is that the United States military may be the only entity available to the federal government to protect the American people.

Both the state and National Guardsmen -- and there were over 50,000 at the height of the response -- and America's active duty military forces performed magnificently on behalf of the victims. But we need a greater integrated use of the military. There are very good reasons why the United States military does not, in the first instance, do homeland security. But we -- and we fully respect and want to preserve those bright lines. But we also recognize we have the United States Northern Command, who works as a partner with the Department of Homeland Security on homeland defense issues, and when state and local first responders are overwhelmed or incapacitated, it may be that our military is the last and only resort. We need to plan and prepare for the Department of Defense to play a significant supporting role during future catastrophic events.

And finally, transformation. In the transformation section of the report, you will find a discussion of developing the concept of jointness in the homeland security community. We take the time to go through in that section the military's experience, tracking from the National Security Act of 1947 and the Goldwater-Nichols Act, and the benefits of developing a joint community, of requiring joint assignments, that is between and among federal agencies with homeland security missions, and also inter-governmental with our state and local partners. That will be part of the objective of establishing a national homeland security university. And we believe that we need to have that sense of jointness so we understand within the federal government and with our state and local partners what the capacity and capabilities are that are available and how most effectively to deploy them.

The second part to transformation is creating a culture of preparedness. This is preying on fear. This is talking about what the current threats are that we face as a nation, and how best individuals, communities and governments can prepare for them. What the threat is to Biloxi will be different than what the greatest threat is to Manhattan or Los Angeles. We need to understand that. We need to respect that, and we need to work with our state and local partners about preparing America's communities.

I think it's fair to say to you that it's not only because I am the mother of two small children, but our kids will lead us in this effort. I venture to say that any of you who have small kids know you can't get in your car without putting on your seatbelt without being corrected by your children, and that's a result of the "Click It or Ticket" campaign in our education system.

Secretary Spellings has been very supportive. We've talked to the governors, and we will talk to them when they're here in town next week about state and local efforts in the education system to make preparedness a part of sort of our national approach so that we're not discussing it, you're not hearing about it for the first time amidst a crisis, but it's something that we have thought about, planned for, and all have participated in.

With that -- that's a brief overview, and you'll notice that I have not touched on all the 17 issue areas. I'm happy to take your questions and discuss it in that context.

Q I had a question. After the storm, Louisiana Governor Blanco and President Bush argued for several days about the control of the military in Louisiana, delaying the arrival of federal troops for I think it was five or six days until after the storm. How does your recommendation for a more aggressive use of federal troops balance the need for state sovereignty?

MS. TOWNSEND: I'm not sure that I accept your recitation of the facts, frankly. But let me address the integrated use of the military because that's really the lesson learned, and the recommendation goes to that.

First and foremost, it talks about training, equipping and resourcing state National Guards. They live in our communities. There was, at the height of it, more than 50,000 National Guardsmen there. And whether you are a National Guardsman or active duty military officer, it is not really relevant to the people who need the help. They see an individual in uniform who is there. And so in the first instance, we need to man, train and equip our National Guard who will get there quicker.

Secondly, the President did commit federal forces. And as you know, General Honore was there very quickly after landfall, moving in right behind the storm. He also had troops moving in behind him to support him. The answer is, what we want to be sure is, as we move both National Guardsmen and active duty forces in, that they have interoperable communications, that they're able to deploy efficiently and effectively. And we will need to work both with the Department of Defense, DHS, and our governors to do that in a way that respects state sovereignty, but gets the American people the help they need when they need it.

Q The GAO said the number one problem was a lack of reporting from the principal federal officer to the White House. There was too much bureaucracy within DHS, especially between FEMA Director Brown and Secretary Chertoff. Past FEMA Directors, successful ones who were deployed in other disasters say that's the number one problem right now. Why don't you address that here?

MS. TOWNSEND: I'm not sure that I agree with you. One of the things we looked at, and you'll see in the report is, what is the authority of the principal federal officer, and making sure that they have the authority to meet their mission requirement. We know from Director Brown's testimony that Secretary Chertoff reached out for him a number of times. It wasn't that there was bureaucracy between them, it was that he didn't -- he's testified that he didn't want to deal with the Secretary.

The answer is, what we need is a system that gets the information and the needs of the people in the disaster area up to the decision-maker, who is Secretary Chertoff, who is responsible for the department. Those operations aren't run out of the White House; they never are. It's in the Department of Homeland Security. Obviously, people here at the White House are available and do support the efforts of the Department of Homeland Security and will continue to do that. That's one of the reasons for the establishment of the Disaster Response Group, to make sure that if there are any disagreements, or any bureaucracy, there's a mechanism here at the White House to break through that.

Q In the report there's a lot of assignments of responsibilities to other agencies that have been -- mostly work through Homeland Security. Do you think it was a mistake to have so many of the response functions sort of directed to Homeland Security? Or was it mismanaged by Homeland Security, and therefore, you're now

redirecting to HUD, to Justice, to these other agencies, major responsibilities that had been primarily handled through Homeland Security previously?

MS. TOWNSEND: I think the best way to capture the sentiment that you're referring to is, there's a lot of expertise resident in the federal government. The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security is the President's incident manager, federal incident response manager, but you're going to ask him to do things in a crisis that he doesn't normally do, or his department normally doesn't do day-to-day. Why not leverage the expertise where he can coordinate it, he can task other agencies. He can pull in that expertise and get it done more effectively than having to have responsibility in his department just there.

Q Looking at the recommendations for the Department of Homeland Security itself to implement, they're extensive, and there's a deadline for many of them of the 1st of June. Given that Secretary Chertoff's behavior has been described as disengaged, and his department's performance was described as alarming and non-functional by some of the senators, is a Department of Homeland Security under Secretary Chertoff one in which you can have confidence to get this work done by the 1st of June?

MS. TOWNSEND: Secretary Chertoff enjoys the confidence of the President. He has been a tremendous partner. And I will tell you, in coming to the 125 recommendations, the Secretary, personally, and his department played a large role in working with us to identify the shortfalls and what we need to work on.

You'll notice in the epilogue -- look, 125 recommendations is a lot of work we have to do, and we had to prioritize. We went to the commanders in the field like Admiral Allen and General Honore, and we said do them, what are the things we need to do first? What are the things we absolutely need to get done before June 1st? And you'll find in the epilogue, there are 11 laid out there that the operators from the field, the commanders from the field have told us, those are the critical ones to get right. It won't surprise you -- integrated command at the field level; communications capability -- the things we've talked about.

Q Are you going to need a change in the law to have more military involvement in these kinds of disasters in the future? And as you said, how do you go about preserving the bright lines on one hand, and on the other hand, having the military be more integrated?

MS. TOWNSEND: There are two issues. When I say preserving the bright lines, we're talking about posse comitatus and law enforcement authority. If you have an integrated use of National Guard and active duty forces, this shouldn't be an issue. National Guardsmen are trained and have -- can support law enforcement functions in a way that active duty military do not. And so you can preserve the bright lines and not seek additional authorities.

In terms of the deployment of active duty forces, we looked at the President's current authorities, and it was -- at least in the review of this group, we did not believe the President needed additional authority. There will be -- as you go through the 125 recommendations, there will be some legislative change required. I've had the privilege of talking to, on a number of occasions, Senator Collins and Senator Lieberman. And we look forward to working with our colleagues on the Hill in going forward.

Q Is there anything that you have -- that you would point to that you think is a really new revelation? Many of these ideas have been talked about in various forums since Katrina hit. Is there one thing, whether it's a small observation or an overarching thing, that you think is a new way of looking at this disaster?

MS. TOWNSEND: I actually think that the transformation section is not something that we've heard talked about. And I think that the whole transformation of national preparedness, which calls for really an integrated approach that the military has found to be incredibly successful, is probably the biggest new idea here.

Many of these are bringing together, as you point out, observations from field commanders. I talked to all the governors involved, and many who are in receiving states. We talked to lieutenant governors and mayors of little towns and big cities. We really threw a very wide net -- we talked to academia and think tanks, NGOs, private sector people -- because what we wanted to do was bring together the best ideas.

I don't claim that every one of them was mine. They're not. I had a terrific group of people, all experts, all professionals working on it, and then we reached out beyond that group.

Q Will there be additional money for the National Guard to play a greater role in domestic response to disasters?

MS. TOWNSEND: The Secretary of Defense has spoken to the National Guard, as has the President when he spoke at the National Guard Bureau. The President has said he will man it to their recruitment capability, to the ceiling. And we will work U.S. Northern Command, Admiral Keating and General Blum to make sure that the training and equipping that they need to do the homeland security mission takes place.

Q Is there actually money --

Q Has the effort to get the military -- the federal military more directly involved and integrated begun already? Or is it still in the talking stage? Is the Pentagon already working on any plan to become better integrated with the National Guard?

MS. TOWNSEND: Absolutely. And you'll see in the 125 recommendations which go into greater detail than I have, the Joint staff, Chairman Pace has been tremendous and had a tremendous investment. In fact, they talk about making the National Guard a joint activity, incorporating to a greater extent the National Guard into the U.S. Northern Command. They've already begun the planning for that, as well as they've assigned a strategic planner over to DHS, so that they can cut through -- you'll see in the report where -- you've heard the horror stories, as I have -- a request for assistance can go through a 21-step process. Well, we've got a strategic planner over at DHS today working through how do you cut through that red tape so, in a crisis, it doesn't take a 21-step process to get the assets you need.

Dana.

Q Can I ask you about a different subject, and that is the port issue? As the President's Homeland Security Advisor, when were you made aware of this? And also, isn't it a requirement because we're talking about a state-owned company, that there should have been an extra 45-day review?

MS. TOWNSEND: I'm going to answer it backwards. No, there is only an extra 45-day review if one of the participants in the CFIUS process -- that is the review process, the mandated review process -- has an objection or a concern. Nobody in this instance did that. In fact, as is now public, DHS, to the extent they had any concerns, engaged directly with the company, got an additional security agreement in place, and they were satisfied. So there was no -- there was no need for an additional 45 days or an investigation.

The intelligence community was involved; Treasury chaired the process. I was not personally involved. I don't sit on the committee. But I will tell you that the homeland security and national security concerns or issues are well represented. You've got the National Security Advisor on the board, you've got DHS involved. And I will tell you that the United Arab Emirates is a tremendous ally in the war on terror; that's been acknowledged both by the intelligence community, and General Pace himself talked about the extraordinary military relationship.

I think we need to step back for a minute and just make clear, this is not about outsourcing port security, which is in the very capable hands of the United States Coast Guard and the Customs and Border Patrol. This is about commercial operations at a port. Many are foreign-owned. This was a British -- it was controlled by a British company before, and there are other ports in this country owned by other foreign concerns.

Q If I could just maybe follow up, given the political sensitivities that are now blatantly obvious, do you wish that somebody would have given you a heads up, as the President's Homeland Security Director, so that perhaps you could have said what you just said to us perhaps to members of Congress a little bit earlier?

MS. TOWNSEND: Well, we're looking at how we can communicate better with members of Congress. There are briefings going on today, we're getting them the facts, and I think once people are satisfied that they have the facts -

- and we've got to look at that process going forward -- they'll be satisfied that the security concerns have been addressed.

Q A two-part question on this aspect that she just raised. The top of page one headlines this morning report, "Bush learned of port deal from press." This news also reported that Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Treasury Secretary John Snow both say they didn't know about it until it was approved. And my question, first of two: What will be done, if anything, to those responsible for this being done without the knowledge of the President or the Secretaries of Defense and Treasury?

MS. TOWNSEND: Okay, the first question. I can't speak to what will be done to them. I will tell you that there are tens of these every year. They are handled and they only come up to the President and to the senior -- to the members of the Cabinet if there's an objection, if the concerns can't be addressed in some way and can't be resolved. This is how the process has worked, and so I can't speak to, having -- I wasn't personally involved in it, so I can't speak to what the process -- how it performed.

Q On page 11 of the 9/11 Commission's report that you're undoubtedly familiar with, it says, "From 1999 through early 2001, the United States pressed the United Arab Emirates, one of the Taliban's only travel and financial outlets to the outside world, to break off ties and enforce sanctions. These efforts achieved little before 9/11." And my question: Why should we now give this nation any control of our ports, which so refused to help in stopping a worse killing of Americans than at Pearl Harbor?

MS. TOWNSEND: There is no question that their performance has changed since 2001 in the war on terror. They have been critical allies in Afghanistan. They have been critical allies in fighting the financial war against terror. They've been critical allies in terms of our military-to-military relationship, as General Pace has talked about.

I don't take issue with the 9/11 Commission's characterization prior to September 11th, but I will tell you, prior to September 11th, Pakistan also recognized the Taliban. They, too, are now a critical ally in the war on terror, without whose support we would not have enjoyed some of the successes we've enjoyed, in terms of capturing or killing some of al Qaeda's leaders. So I would caution you against judging forever one's performance prior to 9/11.

Q What will happen if Congress overrules -- what if Congress overrules the President?

MS. TOWNSEND: That was two. You've got other colleagues. Yes, sir.

Q You're talking about cutting through red tape. Brown has indicated that he wanted to deal directly with the White House. I'm wondering, why would it make it worse to take FEMA back out of Homeland Security, make it its own entity, directly reportable to the President? Why would that make the response worse, if FEMA were back in that situation?

MS. TOWNSEND: The whole idea, when, as part of the Homeland Security Act, FEMA was put into the Department of Homeland Security, the judgment at the time was -- and I think correctly, even looking back -- was that what you needed was a closed loop of preparedness and response and assessment. You needed that to be all-hazards. Many of the capabilities that you're trying to build, in terms of preparedness and homeland security grants, apply regardless of what caused the crisis. Whether the crisis was caused by a natural disaster or an act of terrorism, you need search and rescue capability, you need emergency medical response, you need an emergency alert system. All of these things you're going to need.

And so what you wanted is that capability in the very department that was going to be called upon to manage the federal response so that they could help build the capability, help build the preparedness, and then understand, when they were called upon to respond, or manage the response, what the capability was.

Q But given also -- if I can follow up -- given that the Homeland Security -- the main thrust was -- it was established to respond to terrorism attacks. Do you think that there was too much focus at the highest levels of Homeland Security on responding to terrorism, and not enough on natural disaster? Was that a problem, and is that being corrected, if it was?

MS. TOWNSEND: No, and I think -- that's why in my opening statement I said, what the problem is -- the greatest threat to Biloxi will be different than the greatest threat to New York -- is an acknowledgment to you that Biloxi worries much more about the hurricane season starting on June 1st. One of the reasons to strengthen -- you'll see in the recommendations -- calling for strengthening of FEMA's regional offices, it's the regional offices that are closest to the states, each of the states, that can work with them on a common list of priorities.

I'll tell you, this also goes to the grant system. That's one of the areas we need to work with Congress. Much of the grant system is tied to either terrorism or disaster preparedness. We need to get those strings off. We need to have a grant system that is entirely risk-based, regardless of whether the greatest risk to your state is natural disasters or terrorism. And then we need to hold state and locals accountable. Much like we do in other federal programs, if you're given money to build a capability against whatever the greatest threat in your state is, we need to then know how do you build that capability. We need to assess that. We use the example in the report of the President's management agenda, where we assess federal programs as red, yellow, or green, in terms of building capabilities and meeting goals. We need to do the same thing, we need to be good stewards of the federal treasury and do the same thing with federal grant monies.

Q Given the scope of the changes you're looking for and the failures that you noted, what do you think the reality is of making some of these very significant changes by the start of the hurricane season? We have a short legislative year, we've got the whole House up for reelection, and it's going to be a tough environment to get a lot done. Can you talk a little bit about the obstacles that you see and what plans, if any, you have to try to work with them to get them accomplished?

MS. TOWNSEND: I will tell you, I've been very sort of encouraged by the members that I have spoken to. I spoke -- Senator Lieberman called me back, it must have been 11:00 p.m. last night, or it was very late, and we had a detailed discussion. And he gave his commitment that he was looking forward to working with us, that -- we've had an ongoing dialogue with that committee. I've reached out for Senator Collins; I look forward to speaking with her. I think the members of, in particular, the Senate Government Affairs and Homeland Security Committee, take this very, very seriously. And we want to work with them to make sure that the most critical things we need to get done -- many of them don't need legislation, so I should be clear about that -- and those we're moving forward with today. Some will need -- some of the longer-term ones probably will need legislation. We're looking, for example, the Secretary of Homeland Security has already begun to look at the Stafford Act. One of the recommendations in the report is, we ought to be able to use federal monies for reimbursement; if it's a warned event, we ought to be able to begin that process before landfall. And that will require a change in the Stafford Act. And those are the sorts of things that we're working to identify now so we can work with the Hill.

Q Just one follow-up. You mentioned the Senate Committee now and the senators a couple of times. You haven't mentioned the House lawmakers who are involved in putting together what was a fairly critical report that came out last week. What kind of contacts do you have with those people over there? Is that a different kind of relationship than you're having with Senators Lieberman and --

MS. TOWNSEND: No. I've spoken to Chairman Davis in the past -- I've not spoken with him in the last 24 hours. I have reached out for him. My deputy has been up there to talk with he and his staff on two occasions. We have an ongoing dialogue with him. I should have mentioned I spoke with Chairman King last night and went through in great detail the recommendations in the report.

This is not -- there isn't one committee that we're working with. We really -- we need all the allies on the Hill that we can. And people -- I've been very heartened, I mean, I think people look at this not as a political issue, this is about what can we do to make the country better and stronger.

Q On page 40, it says violent crime was less prevalent than originally reported. In New Orleans we had heard there were murders in the Superdome; we had heard of rapes and things of that nature. Is that, indeed, the case in what you're finding through this report?

MS. TOWNSEND: What we found was -- let me tell you what the lesson learned was, because I think it's the best way to explain what we found. What the lesson learned was we need to do a better job of understanding that there's

a 24/7 news cycle, that we need to have people deploy in the public communications arena with our responders, with our joint field office, with people like General Honore and Admiral Allen, to make sure they are there so we can get -- we can respond to media inquiries and we can get accurate information to you as you're reporting.

What happened is we didn't have that capability. And so people were reporting things that were being heard either out of the Superdome or out of the Convention Center. I do not want to misrepresent -- it was a very difficult situation there. But many of the reports even from government officials turned out to be inaccurate, that many of the reports of -- specific reports that came out during the crisis we couldn't corroborate, we couldn't find out, we couldn't corroborate that they had actually happened.

That's not to say -- I want to be clear -- that's not to say that it was a good environment in either place. All we are saying, all the reports says is there were inaccurate reports of lawlessness and violence that we could not go back and corroborate.

Q So were you able to corroborate a murder or rape -- as we have heard that there was at least one murder in the Superdome; we'd heard there were multiple rapes. Had you -- had that been corroborated about the murder?

MS. TOWNSEND: I'd have to go back and look at the specifics. I would encourage you -- what we did, where there was specific details like that -- that's why there's 66 pages of endnotes -- what we tried to do is if we found corroborating information, or we make a reference to a report in the body of the narrative, we have noted it and put it in the endnotes. And I'd have to go back, I can't recall off the top of my head, standing here. I'm sorry.

Q A lot of this is reassigning a task to other agencies. What's to prevent in the next major disaster to have similar kind of bureaucratic errors now -- instead of it being then Homeland Security's primary fault, it will be Housing and Urban Development, or Transportation and the other agencies? What are you -- is there going to be sufficient funds for these agencies, first of all, and why is it not simply sort of a bureaucratic shuffling instead of actual change?

MS. TOWNSEND: What this -- what the report suggests is assigning to agencies with expertise the responsibility that matches both their expertise and their authorities. It does not dilute in any way the responsibility of the Secretary of Homeland Security to manage the federal response in an incident, and in fact, it creates a body here in the White House, an interagency body that he can access to resolve disputes if he's not satisfied that we're taking action quickly enough.

Q One of the mysteries of the Katrina aftermath was why the buses did not arrive. They were asked to be -- ordered up, we are told. And at the hearing, Michael Brown contends that he has no idea why the buses didn't appear. Do you know why they didn't come?

MS. TOWNSEND: There were efforts made at the state and local level to assure that there were buses there. There was flooding that prevented that from happening. The Department of Transportation did assist in getting -- ensuring that buses were there, and many of those were the very buses that evacuated people to Houston.

We have looked at having -- in fact, you'll see in the report a recommendation about the Department of Transportation. We had -- we enjoyed extraordinary success in terms of the airlift operations, and we need to extend that and understand -- the Department of Transportation has very good relationships with transportation providers and we need to leverage that to ensure that next time not only are we providing for road transportation, but again, just like with logistics, we know where the buses are and when they're going to be there.

Governor Blanco was very frustrated because we couldn't -- we weren't able to tell her during the course of the crisis where they were, when they would arrive, and what the capacity would be. And we need to do a better job at that.

Q Fran, in sort of trying to mediate disputes, insofar as we already know that Mr. Brown and Mr. Chertoff weren't exactly on the same page at times, why wasn't the White House able to mediate that back then? Why create a new structure now looking forward, as opposed to having settled it at the time?

MS. TOWNSEND: Well, even as Mr. Brown said, Secretary Card told him to go back to Secretary Chertoff. And so I think it's pretty clear -- I would use the analogy, oftentimes there is communication -- the President will reach out to a combatant commander, for example, out in the field and have a conversation. The combatant commander understands very well that's not interference in the chain of command. The President oftentimes wants to have a conversation to make sure he gets additional facts or an understanding. And in the United States military, they know very well what their chain of command is up through the Secretary of Defense, and wouldn't consider that being abrogated.

It wasn't any different here. Michael Brown chose not to follow his chain of command. The can't happen again. That has to be very clear. Secretary Chertoff has taken -- accepted responsibility for the actions of his department, and we are committed to ensuring that we have a qualified, competent and committed Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency that respects and responds to the chain of command.

Q Separately, if I may, you also specifically mentioned that the emergency alert system was not utilized properly. Can you just walk us through why it wasn't utilized properly?

MS. TOWNSEND: That was one of the most difficult things to get all the facts, and I will tell you, I don't know that we were able to get every single fact related to it.

It looked to me, as we were assembling the report, that there were radios that -- radio announcements that did go out, some local television announcements that did go out, but it wasn't the sort of wholesale use of it that -- at least when I was growing up, your TV screen went black, and you heard the noise and you knew you had to listen, and it was going to give you instructions.

There was a -- we make a reference in the report to a local official who called Governor Blanco -- and she testified about this -- where he said he had been at a baseball game, and the people didn't really seem to understand the importance of it. And so what we're suggesting is we have to find a communications ability that actually reaches out to public arenas, to your cell phones and pagers, that takes advantage of the many communications -- much in the way of communications technology, that we just didn't use in this sense.

And the fact is -- you'll find in the report, one of the graphics shows you that over the many years of disaster response, we've gone from a place where there were many deaths and little destruction, to now we've seen in disasters there is great destruction but, generally speaking, fewer deaths. That's a tribute to the importance and the emphasis we put on evacuation. We've got to use every tool we've got to make sure that we do evacuations right and that we're communicating the importance of them with the American people, because that's the best way to save lives.

I've got time for one more.

Q Is that a federal function or a local function?

MS. TOWNSEND: Both. Both.

Yes, ma'am. In the back.

Q Speaking about lessons learned, could you point out one or two major actions that, if had been taken, would have made a difference?

MS. TOWNSEND: The two that come immediately to mind, one is communications. That is, not only the technical capability to get the information, but a reporting flow of information so that we have a picture that is fully integrated of state, local and federal assets that are deployed to the region, and what the gaps are. You'll see in the report there is a recommendation for a national operations center, and the idea is, the Secretary of Homeland Security ought to be able to see that picture. That picture also ought to be able to be exported here to the White House Situation Room. So regardless of whether the President and the Secretary are in the same place, they can see the same picture.

The other piece, the second piece to that is you have to have an integrated unity of effort at the tactical field level. What we've found was the joint field office was set up in Baton Rouge, 80 miles from New Orleans, the site of the crisis. You'll hear me say, you can't manage -- you cannot manage an operation in the field from Washington. You don't do much better 80 miles away in Baton Rouge.

What that resulted in was the operators understood it, and people started moving forward, but they moved forward separately. And so no one place -- there was no one place there where you had an integrated picture. We are committed to doing that. I've spoken to the Secretary. The Secretary is already putting plans in place to ensure that happens. And this is one of the things that if you talk to General Honore, he will tell you is one of the single most important things that will make a difference.

I'm sorry I've got another event. I'm sorry.

END 11:54 A.M. EST