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THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

FOREWORD

On August 23, 2005, Hurricane Katrina formed as a tropical storm off the coast of the Bahamas. Over the next seven days, the tropical storm grew into a catastrophic hurricane that made landfall first in Florida and then along the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, leaving a trail of heartbreaking devastation and human suffering. Katrina wreaked staggering physical destruction along its path, flooded the historic city of New Orleans, ultimately killed over 1,300 people, and became the most destructive natural disaster in American history.

Awakening to reports of Katrina's landfall on the Gulf Coast the morning of Monday, August 29, American citizens watched events unfold with an initial curiosity that soon turned to concern and sorrow. The awe that viewers held for the sheer ferocity of nature was soon matched with disappointment and frustration at the seeming inability of the "government"—local, State, and Federal—to respond effectively to the crisis. Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent sustained flooding of New Orleans exposed significant flaws in Federal, State, and local preparedness for catastrophic events and our capacity to respond to them. Emergency plans at all levels of government, from small town plans to the 600-page National Response Plan—the Federal government's plan to coordinate all its departments and agencies and integrate them with State, local, and private sector partners—were put to the ultimate test, and came up short. Millions of Americans were reminded of the need to protect themselves and their families.

Even as parts of New Orleans were still under water, President Bush spoke to the Nation from the city's historic Jackson Square. He stated unequivocally, that "[f]our years after the frightening experience of September the 11th, Americans have every right to expect a more effective response in a time of emergency. When the federal government fails to meet such an obligation, I, as President, am responsible for the problem, and for the solution."¹

In his address, the President ordered a comprehensive review of the Federal response to Hurricane Katrina so we as a Nation could make the necessary changes to be "better prepared for any challenge of nature or act of evil men that could threaten our people."² The President's charge has resulted in the material and conclusions of this Report—*The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*.

What Went Wrong

In general terms, the challenges to our collective response to Hurricane Katrina are not difficult to identify. Hurricane Katrina, its 115-130 mph winds, and the accompanying storm surge it created as high as 27 feet along a stretch of the Northern Gulf Coast from Mobile, Alabama, to New Orleans, impacted nearly 93,000 square miles of our Nation—roughly an area the size of Great Britain. The disaster was not isolated to one town or city, or even one State. Individual local and State plans, as well as relatively new plans created by the Federal government since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, failed to adequately account for widespread or simultaneous catastrophes.

We were confronted by the pictures of destroyed towns and cities, each with their own needs. Smaller cities like Waveland, Mississippi, were completely devastated by Hurricane Katrina and required smaller scale yet immediate search and rescue efforts as well as large volumes of life saving and sustaining commodities. New Orleans, the largest affected city—which dominated much of what Americans saw on their televisions—suffered first from the initial impact of Katrina and then from the subsequent flood caused by breaches in its 350 mile levee system. Over an estimated eighteen-hour period, approximately 80 percent of the city flooded with six to twenty feet of water, necessitating one of the largest search and rescue operations in our Nation's history.

Scope and Methodology

The President made clear that we must do better in the future. The objective of this Report is to identify and establish a roadmap on how to do that, and lay the groundwork for transforming how this Nation—from every level of government to the private sector to individual citizens and communities—pursues a real and lasting vision of preparedness. To get there will require significant change to the status quo, to include adjustments to policy, structure, and mindset.

While the Report notes that disaster preparedness and response to most incidents remains a State and local responsibility, this review did not include an assessment of State and local responses. The President specifically requested that we review the response of the Federal government. Where actions at the State and local level had bearing on Federal decisions or operations, they are included in order to provide full context. We note that although incident response remains a State and local responsibility, we must strengthen Federal support for their efforts and be better prepared for the Federal response to a catastrophic event. Furthermore, we were mindful of how simple

and lucid a situation can appear with the clarity of hindsight. And so, judging in retrospect the decisions made and actions taken in the midst of a major disaster, without consideration of that fuller context, would have been a disservice to all. The scope of the review did not focus on recovery operations that continue to this day. Those important efforts are ongoing and require our continued commitment. Instead, the review's emphasis centers on identifying systemic vulnerabilities and gaps in our response and "fixing government."

The Report is organized in a manner to give the reader the most comprehensive and clear understanding possible of what happened during the Federal response to Hurricane Katrina. It begins with a discussion of the magnitude and complexity of the response challenge by discussing "Katrina in Perspective"—providing an historical comparison both of the hurricane itself and the resultant flood. Only by understanding what the storm was, and was not, can an appropriate and measured assessment of the response take place. A National Preparedness "Primer" on the current Federal framework is then provided to give the reader an understanding of how the current system was supposed to function. This chapter points out some fundamental confusion in the Federal planning and identifies potential shortcomings in the applicability of our plans to catastrophic widespread incidents.

Two major chapters of the Report follow with an analytical, narrative chronology that provides a detailed account of Hurricane Katrina. The first discusses the storm's development in the days "Pre-Landfall," and the next chronicles both the "Week of Crisis" from August 29 through September 5, and concludes with the transition from response to recovery. We note for the reader that the narrative is not meant to be a comprehensive, definitive account of all that transpired, and future information inevitably will shed additional light. We then present a detailed chapter on "Lessons Learned." Here, we describe the seventeen most critical challenges that were problematic before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina's landfall.

We conclude with the most important chapter: "Transforming National Preparedness." It describes the imperative and remedies for fixing the problems that Hurricane Katrina exposed. The foundations of the recommended reforms result in two immediate priorities: We must institutionalize a comprehensive National Preparedness System and concurrently foster a new, robust Culture of Preparedness.

The Report also contains several appendices, including 125 specific recommendations distilled from a four-month review. These recommendations are written for policy makers and emergency managers and contain more technical information not appropriate for the narrative. We have also included some stories of successes and heroic efforts we encountered by responders, volunteers, agencies, and public officials that must not be overlooked.

Conclusion

During a visit to the Gulf Coast, President Bush put our efforts in perspective, saying, "[o]ne of the lessons of this storm is the decency of people, the decency of men and women who care a lot about their fellow citizens, whether they be elected officials or just folks on the ground...trying to make somebody else's life even better than it was before. So we learned some lessons about how to respond, and we're going to change. But some of the lessons shouldn't change, and that is the decency and character of the American people."

Hurricane Katrina prompted an extraordinary national response that included all levels of government—Federal, State, and local—the private sector, faith-based and charitable organizations, foreign countries, and individual citizens. People and resources rushed to the Gulf Coast region to aid the emergency response and meet victims' needs. Their actions saved lives and provided critical assistance to Hurricane Katrina survivors. Despite these efforts, the response to Hurricane Katrina fell far short of the seamless, coordinated effort that had been envisioned by President Bush when he ordered the creation of a National Response Plan in February 2003.³

Yet Katrina creates an opportunity—indeed an imperative—for a national dialogue about true national preparedness, especially as it pertains to catastrophic events. We are not as prepared as we need to be at all levels within the country: Federal, State, local, and individual. Hurricane Katrina obligates us to re-examine how we are organized and resourced to address the full range of catastrophic events—both natural and man-made. The storm and its aftermath provide us with the mandate to design and build such a system.

We hope that this Report marks the beginning of a truly transformational state of preparedness throughout all levels of our Nation. Hurricane Katrina will undoubtedly be regarded by history as one of the most destructive, costly, and tragic events our Nation has ever endured. Yet with collective determination, unity of effort, and effective organizational change, the true legacy of Katrina can be that of a catalyst that triggered a real and lasting improvement to our national preparedness.

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