



The buck stops where?

In Disaster's Aftermath, the Buck Stops at the President's Desk

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Washington Outlook

Ron Brownstein of the LA Times:

The natural instinct of any administration is to circle the wagons when hit with the sort of criticism buffeting the White House over the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina.

President Bush is probably even more resistant than most of his predecessors to admitting error or reexamining decisions.

This is a man, after all, who once famously blanked at a news conference when asked to identify his biggest post-9/11 mistake, and who later draped the nation's highest civilian honor on the CIA director who told him that the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was a "slam dunk."

All of this helps explain why White House and Department of Homeland Security officials initially insisted last week that they had done everything they could, as quickly as they could, to help those in need in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast.

But the national interest demands that the president now rise above that defensive crouch. After a week of despair, suffering and terrifying chaos in New Orleans, this is a moment for the president to be knocking heads, demanding answers and imposing changes throughout the federal government. It was an encouraging, if modest, start Friday when Bush acknowledged the results of the relief effort were "not acceptable."

But the president quickly diluted that message when he added that he was "satisfied with the response," if not the conditions on the ground. Rather than mincing words about Washington's performance, the president should be the first one asking questions — in public and in private.

If it wasn't so tragic, it might be ironic that New Orleans has been submerged into misery as the nation prepares to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Government at all levels has spent billions of dollars since 2001 to prepare for another catastrophe. The national security bureaucracy has undergone the largest reorganization since World War II with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. The president has repeatedly declared the nation on war footing.

And then, as many as three and four days after the levees burst around New Orleans, survivors were stepping around bodies in the street and officials at one hospital were moving patients to upper floors because the lower levels had been lost to looters prowling the halls.

The devastation is so widespread it's likely that any response from the government, no matter how well planned and executed, would not have met all the need. But no one could watch the last week's dizzying events in New Orleans and feel confident that the nation has sufficiently improved its capacity since 9/11 to handle a major disaster — either natural or man-made.

"This is a fundamental failure of preparedness and public administration, and it suggests the strategy we have been following [on domestic security] has fundamental holes in it," said University of Pennsylvania political scientist Donald F. Kettl, a leading expert on government operations and author of the recent book "System Under Stress: Homeland Security and American Politics."

The really scary thing is that few potential threats have been anticipated or studied as extensively as a devastating New Orleans flood. Last week, Bush said, "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." But a chorus of experts warned for years that storm surges after a hurricane could overflow the levees, and produce the same result as the actual breach that occurred: disastrous flooding in the city.

In 2001, the Federal Emergency Management Agency identified a major New Orleans flood as one of the three most likely catastrophic disasters threatening the nation. The New Orleans Times-Picayune detailed the risks in a comprehensive investigative series in 2002. Last summer, Louisiana State University Hurricane Center participated in the "Hurricane Pam Exercise" — a Category 3 simulation — and concluded that more than a million residents would be forced to evacuate, and that as many as 300,000 others would be trapped in the city.

Beyond these prior warnings, Katrina, of course, was tracked for days before it hit the Gulf Coast. If the local, state and federal governments were unprepared to fully cope with a disaster that had been so widely discussed and examined, and which announced its arrival so far in advance, it seems not only prudent but urgent to ask how ready we are to cope with another major terrorist strike. Presumably Al Qaeda won't provide as much advance warning as Katrina.

Yet, despite heroic efforts by thousands of individuals, such as police officers and Coast Guard divers, the government reaction to the flood has seemed as riddled with holes as the New Orleans levees themselves. "I don't have any answer as to why we were not much more ready than where we are today," says Hassan S. Mashriqui, an assistant professor at the LSU Hurricane Center.

Communications among emergency personnel broke down almost immediately after the flood, just as on 9/11. Local officials complained about a lack of coordination and a shortage of information from their federal counterparts — exactly the sort of problems the Department of Homeland Security was expected to remedy. Law and order disintegrated as looters paraded the streets, and stranded residents passed grueling days without aid — or even any word from anyone in authority on where to obtain it. Perhaps

most fundamentally, the flood, just like the 9/11 attacks, revealed a failure of imagination — an inability to plan for catastrophe on the magnitude in which it arrived.

Disasters, as their sole compensation, can sweep away outdated assumptions. The 9/11 attacks triggered basic reassessments about everything from airline security to intelligence. The "American tsunami" should prompt at least as many questions about the government's ability to plan for, and respond to, catastrophe. And the president should be first in line to ask them.

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