The Political Costs of Failure in the Katrina and Rita Disasters
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The Katrina and Rita disasters have raised serious questions about the capabilities of the national emergency management system to handle catastrophic disasters. The system is broken and must be repaired before the next major hurricane, earthquake, volcanic eruption, terrorist attack, or pandemic. The poor disaster responses may have serious political costs for those officials who failed to manage the hazards along the Gulf and/or failed to respond adequately to the storms—or simply appeared to be ineffectual in very dire circumstances. There have already been political casualties among the administrators responsible for managing the responses, and there may well be casualties among the politicians when voters go to the polls. The recommendation to give the military a lead responsibility in catastrophic disaster responses has been met with strong opposition; the issue may broaden the rift between governors’ offices and the White House over homeland security and emergency management and broaden the gap between local emergency management imperatives and federal policies.

**Keywords:** disaster response; hazard mitigation; evacuation; disaster recovery; intergovernmental relations; military roles; Hurricane Katrina; Hurricane Rita

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will leave political scars, as well as social and economic scars, on the Gulf Coast. Politicians and administrators may pay a high price for failing to deal with the disasters adequately or simply for appearing ineffectual in the days and weeks.

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after. The political repercussions from the poor disaster response are already being felt in city halls, county and parish courthouses, state legislatures, governors’ offices, and Washington offices and electoral fortunes may suffer when residents have a chance to express their frustration and anger at the polls. The details of what went wrong are slowly coming to light, and those responsible for anticipating the disasters, managing the hazards, preparing for and responding to the disasters, and facilitating the recovery should be held accountable. The “blame game” is an American tradition, but so is the identification of “lessons learned” so that errors are not repeated and successes can be replicated. What went wrong, and how can we repair the nation’s emergency management system before the next major hurricane, earthquake, volcanic eruption, catastrophic terrorist attack, or pandemic strikes?

Clearly, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita raise serious questions concerning the capacities of local, state, and federal governments to deal with major hazards and disasters. Obviously, we are not prepared to deal with catastrophic events, including a terrorist attack or an avian influenza pandemic. Katrina and Rita raise long-term questions concerning our capacities to mitigate hazards and deal with disasters. They also raise more immediate and practical questions concerning how to rebuild the infrastructure lost in the storms, facilitate the economic recovery of communities destroyed by the storms, and move evacuees into permanent homes. How will local, state, and federal governments help the businesses, colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, and families struggling to survive? How will we repair the “cracks in our social foundation” (Langer 2004)—the flaws in the nation’s support networks for the poor, elderly, and disabled—that were revealed by the disasters? How can we deal with the racism that contributed to the slow response to devastated African American communities (see, e.g., Gilman 2005). Do troop deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan removed critical National Guard resources that governors depend on in emergencies? What procedural and organizational flaws delayed the dispatch of emergency responders to the disaster area and delayed the delivery of water, food, trailers, and other supplies? The recovery process is also raising questions about the siting of “FEMA cities” for those who lost homes and the recruitment and housing of workers for rebuilding. Recovery, like hazard mitigation and disaster response, is a political process.

Poor implementation of emergency plans, poor communication, and poor decision processes were evident in the lack of congruence between conditions “on the ground” in the disaster areas and local, state, and national decision making. Local, state, and federal leaders appeared disconnected at best and insensitive and incompetent at worse. The news media, too, had problems finding a vantage point from which the scale of devastation could be viewed. Very large sections of the disaster area simply were not accessible to media or rescuers. Thousands of victims saw no rescuers and received no aid for a week or more after the storms passed. All the while, victims, emergency management officials, local emergency responders, and the media waited for the cavalry to arrive—and it did not. Whether reasonable or not, there was some expectation that the cavalry would arrive in helicopters with water, food, tents, and other necessities almost as soon as the storms passed. When
that did not happen, Michael Brown, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), became the symbol of the failed response. But failure was evident from the city hall level to the White House (Waugh 2005a, 2005b). Indeed, Brown and his predecessor, James Lee Witt, both had warned that FEMA was no longer up to the task of dealing with major disasters because of budget cuts and personnel losses (Strohm 2005b). The critical link between the federal government and state and local emergency management offices was also broken.

Our system for dealing with disaster has to be repaired quickly, and opinions differ fundamentally on how that should be done. President Bush has recommended that the powers of the military be expanded during future catastrophic disasters (Sanger 2005) and even that the military become the nation’s lead responder to catastrophic events. But there is strong opposition to “federalizing” natural disaster response and expanding the use of the military (see, for example, GovExec.com 2005). Active duty military troops have been used in past disasters, and they have been considered a critical resource when other resources are outstripped, but questions remain concerning their availability and their training to deal with disasters.

Administration experts recommend that FEMA be removed from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to restore its capabilities to deal with natural disasters (see, for example, Kettl 2005; Cigler 2005). It is further argued that the “command and control” orientation of DHS is ill suited to the collaborative and cooperative orientation of the nation’s emergency management networks (Waugh 2003; Kettl 2005). Indeed, in many cases, federal officials and agencies interfered with state disaster responses by delaying the deployment of National Guard troops and volunteers (see, e.g., Sentell 2005; Malone 2005). Still other voices argue that the command structures be strengthened to ensure better control and coordination during future catastrophic disasters.

Ironically, following Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and Hurricane Andrew in 1992, FEMA was also criticized for being slow to mount a response. President George H. W. Bush replaced the FEMA director as coordinator of the federal disaster effort in south Florida with Andrew Card, then secretary of transportation. After the Andrew disaster, Congress considered dismantling FEMA during its reauthorization hearings. Fortunately, the agency was reinvented by the Clinton administration and became one of the federal government’s biggest successes. FEMA can be reinvented once again, but it is unlikely that that can be done within DHS. The strengths of the old FEMA were in its collaborative relationships with state and local officials and its focus on building local capacities to deal with hazards and disasters. DHS has a different orientation toward public involvement and a different perception of its role in dealing with catastrophic disasters.

The Katrina and Rita disasters have focused public attention on natural and technological hazards, in addition to the threat of terrorism, and on holding public officials accountable for dealing effectively with them. The 2006 elections will show whether political costs accrue for failures during the disasters. That accountability or lack of accountability will likely determine whether the nation’s emergency management system will be repaired.
Natural and Man-Made Disaster

The Hurricane Katrina disaster is the largest natural disaster in U.S. history, surpassing the Great San Francisco earthquake and firestorm of 1906 in terms of lives and property lost—and the full costs are not yet known. Like San Francisco, the city of New Orleans experienced two distinct disasters, wind and water damage caused by the hurricane and flooding caused by several levee breaks. Both disasters were in some measure man-made, although the vulnerability of San Francisco was less understood in 1906. Whether the Katrina and Rita disasters will exact the same political costs as the San Francisco disaster is uncertain as yet. After the earthquake, city officials were first cheered for their efforts and then voted from office when the corruption and incompetence of their administration was exposed.

The vulnerability of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were certainly known well before Katrina began winding her way through the Caribbean. The hazard had been described in government reports, media stories, and academic studies. The risks were outlined in *National Geographic* magazine in October 2004 and *Scientific American* in October 2001. Federal, state, and local emergency management authorities had completed a training exercise, the Hurricane Pam simulation, a year earlier on just such a disaster. While the Pam exercise arrived at somewhat different conclusions concerning the numbers of casualties and amount of damage, the numbers showed a catastrophic event (Beriwal 2005). The scale of the disaster that would result from a real hurricane in that region was not a surprise—or, at least, it should not have been a surprise.

The hazard developed over many decades accompanied by many opportunities to address problem areas such as the levees. The risk was acknowledged periodically. Officials even warned that residents of New Orleans should keep axes in their attics so that they could cut their way through roofs if their homes were flooded. Scars remained from Hurricane Camille’s impact along the same coastline in 1969. Residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama had ample experience with strong hurricanes. But little was done to address vulnerabilities. There was too little regulation of development along the coast to mitigate wind and surge from major storms, too little investment to ensure that levees were strong enough to survive major storms, too little attention to emergency planning to help get vulnerable populations to safety, and too little attention by public officials and the public to the risk of a strong hurricane. Sorting out the blame for the loss of life and property will take decades; there will be plenty of blame to share among public officials and private individuals.

Local authorities are to blame for poor management of the levee system and poor decision making regarding mass evacuation and mass sheltering. In New Orleans, the evacuation order gave little time to move residents out of the city: two hundred school buses were left to the floodwaters rather than being used to evacuate residents, municipal workers responsible for manning pump stations were evacuated rather than kept at their posts in case of a levee break (Mulrine 2005), and the city’s emergency plan was not implemented (ABC News 2005). Similar
problems occurred in other jurisdictions in the path of the storm. Where there were emergency operations plans, they were not implemented or were only partially implemented. Many local emergency management and emergency response agencies were simply overwhelmed, often reduced to saving themselves or releasing personnel to save their own families.

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State officials are to blame for being slow to understand the scale of the disaster. State resources, including National Guard troops and state police, were not deployed as quickly as they might have been. Slow activation of state rescue and relief operations left local emergency managers and first responders on their own. Now state legislatures are investigating the use of the National Guard, particularly with thousands of Louisiana and Mississippi Guard and Reserve troops deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, and the adequacy of local mass evacuation and other emergency plans.

Federal authorities are to blame for the slow response to state requests for aid and for their reactive posture. Warnings of the impending disaster were given to Secretary Chertoff and top FEMA officials days before Katrina made landfall (Sullivan 2005). Nonetheless, federal officials waited for the states to request aid rather than proactively assisting their state and local counterparts. While Governor Blanco of Louisiana requested federal assistance well before the storm and the levee breaches, assistance was days away. Once the need to act was realized, the federal agencies were slow to deliver aid to victims stranded in New Orleans and other communities, slow to rescue those trapped in homes and hospitals, slow to recover bodies, and slow to deliver trailers to disaster area. Senator Lott of Mississippi complained that twenty thousand trailers were held up in Atlanta waiting for contractors to move them to Mississippi and Louisiana (CNN 2005a). Hundreds of volunteer emergency response and medical personnel were waiting in frustration to be deployed by federal officials.
The networks of local, state, and federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations that make up the national emergency management system were also in disarray. Some agencies, including the American Red Cross, were dissuaded from responding quickly to the disaster because of safety and security concerns. Volunteers were encouraged to wait for officials to ask them to deploy and indicate where the greatest needs were. Some volunteers waited weeks for the call to deploy, even those trained and used by FEMA during the Florida hurricanes in 2004.

Clearly, the national system failed to function as it must, resulting in human and economic costs. More than a thousand people died; bodies are still being found months after the disasters. In the weeks after the storm, problems were evident in the Katrina recovery effort and again when Hurricane Rita made landfall in Louisiana and Texas and Hurricane Wilma made landfall in south Florida. The news media began to focus on the potential for even more calamitous events as Hurricane Victor hit south of the United States and Hurricanes Alpha and Beta passed east of the mainland. Had a major earthquake or a major terrorist attack struck during those weeks, the capacities of the federal government to support emergency response might have been overwhelmed, just as local capacities were overwhelmed by Katrina.

For a time, it appeared that the losses from Katrina would be much worse. Estimates of casualties were in the thousands and FEMA had ordered twenty-five thousand body bags. Estimates of the time to drain floodwaters from New Orleans were from several to many months. Similarly, the potential for Rita to hit Galveston raised the specter of a megadisaster like the 1900 storm that killed as many as eight thousand people. Rita could have been much worse. However, estimates of the economic costs of the storms have grown. The extent of social-psychological damage is still uncertain.

Slow and Disorganized Response

In the hours and days that followed Hurricane Katrina’s landfall, more and more attention focused on the slow and inadequate disaster response. The evident lack of understanding of the function and role of emergency management by public officials at all levels was painfully obvious to those within the emergency management professional and disaster research communities. Media criticism focused on FEMA, whereas professional and academic communities largely criticized its parent organization, DHS, and the media. It was frustrating to watch the disaster unfold and to see officials fail to identify and address problems that were obvious to those who understand disasters and emergency response. The news coverage also failed to present a complete picture of the disaster. The coverage did identify some major issues that needed to be addressed, but it also focused too closely on looting and violence. The extent of the violence now appears to have been grossly overblown (Kinney 2005) and, in fact, may have diverted law enforcement and military personnel from rescue to security operations (Pierre and Gerhart 2005).
Much is now known about why the response to Katrina was so inadequate. But questions remain concerning decision processes prior to, during, and soon after the disaster began. Congressional committees are sorting through e-mail messages, documents, public statements, and other materials to determine the timelines for local, state, and federal responses. Committees are examining the more obvious failures to move resources to the disaster areas quickly and focusing on such problems as FEMA’s poor resource inventory system. While partisan differences are driving some of the investigations and coloring some of the analyses, there appears to be consensus on some of the basic problems.

Confusion over state and federal roles was a major problem. Homeland Security officials were reluctant to be as proactive as they might be for fear of violating the authority of state officials. State officials were confused by the new federal procedures and structures for dealing with major emergencies and disasters. The National Response Plan (NRP) was newly adopted and not widely understood. The new National Incident Management System (NIMS) was not fully implemented and is not widely understood.

In many respects, the poor emergency response by local, state, and federal agencies was due to the sheer scale of the disaster. Roads were impassable along the coast due to debris and flooding, bridges and roads were destroyed by storm surge and wind, and victims were scattered among and between the hundreds of communities that were in the path of the storm. Access to the disaster area was extremely difficult in many areas and impossible in some. Downed power lines posed risks to those attempting to access or leave the disaster area. Rescue and relief operations were delayed by water and debris and by reports of violence (Pierre and Gerhart 2005). The fact that some communities were not reached for a week or more speaks to the poor preparedness efforts by state and federal authorities. Such delays are not uncommon during major hurricane and earthquake disasters, however, and in fact, some communities in central Florida were not reached quickly during the 2004 hurricanes and during Hurricane Wilma.

The unexpectedly large number of people needing assistance during and immediately following the levee breaches in New Orleans revealed a clear “preparedness divide” (Light 2005), with a very large poor population lacking the resources necessary to evacuate and to survive even a day or two without aid. The debacle in New Orleans revealed, according to Der Spiegel, “America’s Dark Underbelly” (Hornig 2005), the large and increasing percentage of poor people in the United States and the underlying racial conflicts associated with poverty and discrimination. Ironically, a report on the increasing poverty in the United States was issued the day that Katrina turned the spotlight on the problem in New Orleans.

Professional emergency managers understand that roughly 80 percent of residents typically respond to evacuation orders. The remaining residents do not have the necessary resources to evacuate, are not mobile enough to evacuate, are caregivers who remain to take care of family members, are unwilling to leave pets or their homes and possessions, or do not believe that the risk is great enough to warrant leaving. Some may not hear or understand the evacuation orders, particularly those who are homeless and are not reached by the media or by emergency warn-
ing systems. Some may not understand English. Some may not believe the officials who issue the warnings and order evacuation. When they do evacuate, many do not have the medicines they need under normal circumstances, and many more do not have sufficient medicine to get by for days without assistance. In short, there should always be an expectation that a significant percentage of the residents will not respond to evacuation orders—even mandatory evacuation orders—and an expectation that a significant percentage will need assistance immediately. By contrast, emergency management and Homeland Security officials want individuals and families to have “seventy-two-hour kits” with at least three days’ worth of food and water, flashlights, radios, and other essentials. In reality, many Americans live from day to day and do not have the wherewithal to keep three days’ worth of food, let alone other supplies, in reserve. In short, expecting emergency responders to arrive as soon as the storm has passed may be unreasonable, but expecting all residents to have three days’ worth of supplies is also unreasonable. The desperation among the victims stranded in the Superdome and in neighborhoods in New Orleans became an embarrassment to the nation, but similar situations developed in other communities in Louisiana and Mississippi without receiving the same media coverage. The situation should have been anticipated.

In other respects, the poor emergency response reflected the incomplete implementation of the NRP and the NIMS. The Federal Response Plan (FRP) guided national disaster responses through much of the 1990s and also guided the response to the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks in 2001. Under FRP, FEMA served as the coordinator of federal response activities, able to call upon twenty-six federal agencies, including the American Red Cross, to provide everything from emergency shelter to unemployment counseling. The presumption was that state and local authorities would be the lead and FEMA would coordinate closely to support their relief efforts. Nongovernmental organizations from the Salvation Army to Pet Rescue served to expand resources to deal with large catastrophes and to address problems that might not be addressed adequately by government agencies (Waugh 2003).

With the creation of the DHS, the role of FEMA changed. No longer a cabinet-level agency, FEMA is dependent upon DHS officials for its budget, spending priorities, and mission priorities. The FEMA budget shrank, FEMA personnel and resources were shifted to counterterrorism programs, and the morale of FEMA personnel suffered (CNN 2005b). The agency is effectively being dismantled with its constituent parts being moved to other parts of DHS. DHS itself is focused on preventing terrorist attacks and is not organized to deal with natural disasters or even terrorist-caused disasters (Waugh and Sylves 2002; Waugh 2005b).

Under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), more than thirty-one thousand personnel were loaned by more than a dozen states for search and rescue, law enforcement, biomedical waste management, firefighting, communications, and other functions. EMAC is a nationwide compact among states administered by the National Emergency Management Association, an association of state emergency management directors, to share resources in major disasters (EMAC 2005). More than seventy-five hundred federal volunteers were enlisted
in the response and recovery effort. Michael Brown, director of FEMA, requested two thousand DHS volunteers on August 29 (Pulliam 2005). FEMA has drawn upon volunteers from its own offices, as well as from other federal agencies, in the past and continues to do so. The Medical Reserve Corps and other volunteer groups were also used in the Katrina and Rita responses but, like other volunteers, were only slowly integrated into the relief effort.

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The situation along the Mississippi and Alabama coasts did not seem as dire as that in New Orleans, but that was due to the lack of news coverage. Rescue came late to many communities. Emergency supplies reached the rural areas much later than Biloxi, Mobile, and the coastal towns. Local emergency managers were overwhelmed, isolated, with few resources to provide to their residents and the evacuees from the worst-hit areas. Some local emergency management agencies had no food and water for their own personnel.

The slow state and federal response efforts, inadequacy of local resources, limited availability of National Guard troops, and lack of communication within and without their communities contributed to the frustration of local officials. Both Louisiana and Mississippi have large numbers of National Guard and Reserve personnel deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan compared with other states. Close to four thousand Louisiana National Guard and Reserve troops and more than fifty-two hundred Mississippi National Guard and Reserve troops, including many from the communities devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, were deployed during the disaster (U.S. Department of Defense 2005). Texas’s deployment was large, as well. The Guard and Reserves have been vital resources during major disasters, and that was no less true during the Katrina and Rita disasters. By September 4, thirty-five thousand National Guard personnel were involved, and by September 11, fifty thousand National Guard and twenty thousand active-duty personnel became involved in the disaster operation—some under state control and some under federal control (Kitfield 2005). However, the Guard lacked up-to-date communications equipment and had insufficient numbers of trucks, inadequate engineering equipment, and few other resources because of deployments to Iraq and
Afghanistan. National Guard units were using Vietnam-era communications equipment (Moniz 2005).

“FEMA City” Politics and Redevelopment

In Louisiana and Mississippi, restoration of lifelines has been faster than expected, for the most part, although restoration of power has been slow in some areas. Long-term recovery is just getting under way and may take many years. In Louisiana, Governor Blanco appointed an advisory commission, the Louisiana Recovery Authority, to help set priorities for dealing with the 1.5 million Louisianans displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, eighty-one thousand businesses affected, and two hundred thousand homes destroyed. Tax incentives, more stringent building codes, levee management, takeover of the Orleans Parrish school system, and a comprehensive coastal and hurricane plan have been the major agenda items for the governor and the Louisiana legislature (Alford 2005; Millhollow 2005). Mayor Nagin of New Orleans created a similar commission, and the state and city commissions have established links to facilitate communication (Koppel 2005). However, there are signs that partisan differences may delay the redevelopment effort. Gambling has been a major revenue source for Mississippi, and recovery depends on rebuilding the casinos and reducing their vulnerability to storms. State officials have suggested changes in state law to permit the casinos to be rebuilt on the shoreline, rather than offshore; that suggestion has been met with considerable opposition from those who oppose casinos altogether. Because of the risk in future storms, owners may be reluctant to rebuild their floating casinos because of increased insurance costs.

Recommendations range from rebuilding communities much as they were prior to the disaster to not rebuilding large parts of New Orleans at all to moving most of the development away from the coastlines in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama (see, e.g., Jacob 2005; Dean 2005). Moving to higher ground north of Lake Pontchartrain has been recommended. Buying out those areas most vulnerable to flooding and returning them to marshland has been suggested. Moving port facilities and other industrial facilities further up the Mississippi and away from the Gulf has been suggested. Better land-use planning is a frequent suggestion. The levees are being evaluated to determine how they may be strengthened. Some answers may come from those evaluations, particularly if the cost to strengthen levees is extremely high.

Questions still remain concerning the long-term housing of evacuees, including the use of hotels and motels, apartments, temporary shelters, and dispersed FEMA trailers. The creation of new “FEMA cities” of trailers has been opposed by many communities. Those engaged in rebuilding need temporary housing. Controversy is growing over recruitment of workers from elsewhere, including Mexico, rather than from among New Orleans’s displaced workers. The demographic composition of the city is certain to change as many evacuees have said that they do not
plan to return. Forty-four percent of those surveyed in Houston shelters in September 2005 said that they plan to relocate permanently, with the overwhelming majority saying that they plan to remain in Houston or elsewhere in Texas (Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University 2005). While plans may change, it is likely that many will not return to their hometowns in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Questions also remain concerning the long-term employment of evacuees, including providing housing and employment during the rebuilding of New Orleans and coastal communities and the long-term revitalization of New Orleans and other devastated coastal communities. Rebuilding tax bases is necessary to restore local public services and finance redevelopment. State and local officials are pushing for more use of local resources to rebuild, including contracting with local firms for the rebuilding of schools and infrastructure. Local control or at least direction of recovery is certain to become a contentious political issue and one that will afford local officials opportunity to provide leadership.

Concluding Observations

Hurricane Katrina caused the worst disaster in American history, and Hurricane Rita contributed to the dislocations of residents, loss of property, and disaster response problems. Extensive damage was done to property along the Gulf Coast by storm surge and wind. The scale of the Katrina disaster was such that extraordinary efforts were necessary to preserve life. New Orleans escaped the worst of Katrina’s wind and water, but breaches in the levees caused flooding that inundated most of the city. Coastal communities in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana were devastated. The infrastructure along the coastline was severely damaged.

State and local emergency management programs were not up to the tasks of evacuating residents, sheltering and feeding those that remained, conducting search and rescue operations, and initiating the recovery effort. In many cases, local emergency services were not just overwhelmed, they were wiped out. Local first responders, like their neighbors, were struggling to stay alive and, like their neighbors, were often without food or water.

The assumptions upon which local, state, and federal disaster responses were based were seriously flawed. A large percentage of the affected population was much more vulnerable than officials assumed. Poverty and racial distrust complicated the disaster and the response. Confusion over local and state emergency operations plans complicated the evacuations and everything that followed. The New Orleans emergency plan was not implemented. State officials requested federal aid early in anticipation of a catastrophic disaster but were slow to deploy their own resources. Hurricane Rita made landfall along the Texas-Louisiana border, further damaging communities hit by Katrina in Louisiana and precipitating a mass evacuation of residents along the Texas and Louisiana coasts. The evacuation of Houston and neighboring towns revealed serious problems not anticipated in the disaster planning, such as the limited availability of gasoline along the major routes.
Evacuees from the Katrina disaster were again threatened by a major hurricane and joined by a new group of evacuees.

Confusion over the federal role also complicated the responses. The NRP was not activated for the Katrina and Rita disasters, and indeed, it was not activated for the Wilma disaster in Florida weeks later. Poor communication made it difficult for federal, as well as state and local, officials to understand the needs of victims in the disaster area. The expectation that federal resources would not be needed for seventy-two to ninety-six hours was disastrously wrong. The scale of the disaster and the vulnerability of the population required a much faster response.

This might have been the first test of the NRP, had it been activated. It was a test of the ad hoc approach to disaster response that DHS used during the Florida hurricanes in the fall of 2004. In Florida, there was strong incentive to respond swiftly and to return evacuees to their communities as soon as possible because of the election. As many resources as could be found were deployed. Still, serious problems resulted from DHS personnel being unfamiliar with disaster response procedures and unwilling to deal with the media or residents. The lack of access to many communities in central Florida for days after the storms passed was very similar to the experiences in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas after Katrina and Rita.

There are still active investigations of the disaster assistance provided to areas minimally affected by the hurricanes. An ad hoc response is inadequate in catastrophic and even lesser disasters. The national emergency management system involves networks of local, state, and federal emergency management agencies; nongovernmental disaster relief organizations; private sector organizations; community groups; and volunteers. These networks deal with ordinary and extraordinary disasters and represent the nation’s surge capacity in catastrophic disasters. Effective coordination is critical and was lacking from state and federal officials during the Katrina disaster. In some cases, officials interfered with the response by nongovernmental organizations and volunteers.

The response by state and local officials to President Bush’s suggestion that the U.S. military assume responsibility for catastrophic disaster responses was quick and unequivocal. The governors of Washington, Mississippi, Michigan, Arkansas, West Virginia, Delaware, and Alabama have criticized the suggestion as a usurpation of state authority (Gouras 2005). The governors of Florida and Arizona criticized the suggestion in testimony before Congress, and the National Governors Association has voiced the objections of its members (Strohm 2005a). In fact, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida accepted the blame for a slow response to Hurricane Wilma after telling federal officials that the state would take responsibility for delivering supplies to storm victims in south Florida (Anderson 2005). The National Emergency Management Association, which is the professional organization for state emergency management directors, has also voiced its opposition. By contrast, the U.S. Conference of Mayors has recommended an expanded military role in disaster response so that cities can have access to military assets earlier and expressed frustration with the slowness with which states have been providing funding to local governments (Wodele 2005). In fact, an annex to the NRP, the Catastrophic Incident Annex, might have been activated to give federal officials...
authority to respond without state approval (Strohm 2005a), but there are serious concerns about conflicts with state authority. Opposition to President Bush’s recommendation concerning the use of the military may well encourage opposition to other recommendations that have extended federal authority over state assets, such as recent recommendations to close Air Guard bases that have roles in state disaster operations (Schmitt 2005).

If Katrina and Rita are to be learning experiences that will reduce the potential for similar response failures, access to information is essential, and an independent analysis of the responses is absolutely essential.

Local officials also are acting on their own to address their own communities’ hazards and to prepare their own residents in the absence of effective federal plans and policies. The Katrina disaster has forced state and local officials to examine the potential for catastrophic disaster in their own communities. California officials are concerned about levee breaks and earthquakes; Seattle officials are concerned about vulnerabilities to earthquakes; Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming officials are concerned about an eruption of the Yellowstone volcano; Utah officials are concerned about vulnerabilities to earthquakes; and so on (Murphy 2005). Local and state officials have a political, legal, and ethical obligation to address the hazards that pose serious risk to their own communities, regardless of the priorities of the federal government. There are political costs and, for local officials, potential legal costs that might be exacted if they fail to prepare for and respond adequately to a disaster. A means of addressing the risk of legal liability and mitigating potential political costs is adherence to accepted national standards. In emergency management, the standards for professional development can be found in the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM) program. The CEM is the national credential for professional emergency managers. It is earned by those who have the requisite education, training, experience, and involvement in emergency management. Requirements include breadth of experience, knowledge of emergency management roles and functions, and knowledge of management techniques. At the programmatic level, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1600 has been acknowledged by Congress, the 9-11 Commission, and other bodies as the accepted international standards for emergency management programs.
Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) operationalizes and expands the NFPA standards for state and local emergency management programs. The EMAP standards affirm that emergency management programs include the public agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and businesses that constitute the capabilities of states and communities to deal with disasters (Bentley and Waugh 2005). These programs provide benchmarks for professional emergency managers and emergency management programs to ensure that they have the tools to manage risks and to deal with disasters. Interestingly, of the states affected by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, Florida has the only accredited emergency management program, and it demonstrated its capabilities, albeit with some difficulty, during the 2004 hurricanes and the Wilma disaster.

Sorting out responsibility for the Katrina debacle and problems with the Rita response may be difficult. Congress is having problems getting information from DHS on communications between the department, FEMA, and the White House leading up to, during, and after Katrina’s landfall. Similar problems in getting information from DHS were experienced by the 9-11 Commission (Strohm 2005c), and the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Service have also had difficulty extracting responses from DHS (see, e.g., Waugh forthcoming; Strohm 2005c). If Katrina and Rita are to be learning experiences that will reduce the potential for similar response failures, access to information is essential, and an independent analysis of the responses is absolutely essential.

If lessons are not drawn from the Katrina and Rita experiences, corrections will not be made. If officials are not given incentives to repair the national emergency management system, little will be done. For the officials who failed to address the hazards and/or failed to respond adequately, there may be serious political costs. For the communities that fail to mitigate hazards to reduce the likelihood of similar disasters, there may also be serious political and economic costs. The hurricanes have provided a “window of opportunity,” and that “window” will begin to close as the memories of the disasters fade.

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