

# Executive Memorandum

No. 981  
September 22, 2005



Published by The Heritage Foundation

## Katrina: A Fair Framework for Assessing the Response and the Next Steps

*James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.*

Withering criticism of the federal response to Hurricane Katrina will prompt a close examination of what happened and why. However, common sense should guide the examination. Specifically, Congress should not take the easy way out by passing the buck to an unelected commission to lead the investigation. Congress should do its own job and do it right.

**Assessing the Response.** President George W. Bush was absolutely correct in labeling the national response “inadequate.” When national catastrophes occur, the nation’s resources need to be mobilized to respond immediately. Equally important, Americans must remain confident that their leaders, at all levels of government, are in charge and doing the right things to make all Americans safer. On both counts, the nation fell short, and Americans have a right to understand why and what can be done better.

Any worthwhile analysis must be scrupulously nonpartisan and start without preconceived notions. Some key considerations should frame the inquiry.

*First, Congress must understand the operational environment.* As one veteran responder put it, the challenge of getting massive aid into flooded New Orleans and other devastated areas was a logistical problem like “landing an army at Normandy with a little less shooting.” Transportation networks,

power, and communications—all the things essential to speeding aid—were destroyed. Some observers remarked that the Gulf Coast looked like a Third World disaster, and they were right. The storm surge and flood washed away everything that makes up a modern city and left a mass of desperation, isolated

from the rest of the country. The notion that the dire needs of a million people spread out over tens of thousands of square miles of devastated terrain could be quickly addressed under impossible conditions is ludicrous.

Analysts will also have to pay close attention to chronology. In the immediate aftermath of the

storm, the hurricane appeared to have spared New Orleans. Thus, aid was directed toward those in even more dire circumstances. A day later, the levees broke, making the city a top priority, yet at least a day or more of response time was lost in redirecting aid.

In the aftermath of disaster, it is easy to see the decisions that should have been made. It is far less

- 
- President Bush was absolutely correct in labeling the national response “inadequate.”
  - Any worthwhile analysis must be scrupulously nonpartisan and start without preconceived notions.
  - The U.S. unquestionably needs a greater national capacity to respond to catastrophic disasters.
- 

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/em981.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/em981.cfm)

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis  
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

clear during a crisis. The choices of leaders and responders should be judged under the conditions in which they operated, not based on hindsight.

*Second, Congress must evaluate the need for catastrophic response.* An analysis of what went wrong has to focus on the nation's capacity to respond to a catastrophic disaster. The current system is built on "tiered response." Local leaders turn to state resources when they are exhausted. In turn, states turn to Washington when their means are exceeded. Both must communicate their requirements to federal officials and manage the response effectively.

In most disasters, local resources handle things in the first hours and days until national resources can be requested, marshaled, and rushed to the scene. Deploying national resources usually takes days. This is particularly true when responding to a hurricane. Assets prepositioned too close to the hurricane's likely path might be destroyed or stranded by the destruction to the infrastructure.

Catastrophic disasters are of a completely different character. State and local resources may well be exhausted from the onset, and government leaders may well be unable to determine or communicate their priority needs. In such a situation, national resources need to show up in hours, not days, in unprecedented amounts, regardless of the difficulties. The United States lacks the means and capabilities to do this. This is something that the nation still needs to build.

Katrina will provide a standard for the capabilities that must be on hand. Even years after September 11, 2001, the U.S. has only begun to build the needed system. In part, this is because Congress, states, and cities wanted it this way. All of them insisted on doling out grants with scant regard to national priorities. Katrina shows why this piecemeal approach is wrong. Many of the New Orleans fire stations were buried under water, along with much of the equipment bought with federal dol-

lars. Only a national system—capable of mustering the whole nation—can respond to catastrophic disasters.

*Third, Congress needs to understand why things went right, as well as what could have been done better.* Focusing on the incredible achievements of America's responders is just as important as identifying what went wrong. Several hundred thousand people were successfully evacuated before the storm. If they not been, the death toll would have been unimaginable. Tens of thousands were rescued during and after the storm under harrowing conditions, including over 33,000 by the U.S. Coast Guard. Tens of thousands more, including those at the Superdome and the New Orleans convention center, were evacuated before they succumbed to dehydration, hunger, exposure, or disease. Today, many thousands are being quartered safely by communities around the country.

In comparison to the devastation reaped by the tsunami in Southeast Asia, the U.S. capacity to save lives during a similar disaster has proven unparalleled. This success resulted from the decisions of government leaders, volunteer groups, private-sector initiatives, and the selfless actions of communities and individuals. All are vital components of a national response. All of these efforts, the plans that guided them, and how they worked together need to be evaluated.

**The Way Ahead.** The U.S. unquestionably needs a greater national capacity to respond to catastrophic disasters. Did we do the best with what was available? Have we become better since 9/11? And what are the next steps? These are fair questions. A commonsense, disciplined, dispassionate analysis directed by Congress can answer them.

—James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow for National Security and Homeland Security in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.