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Removing FEMA from DHS Would Be a Terrible Mistake

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It's déjà vu all over again: People are arguing that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) should be taken out of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Recent disaster responses, from the California wildfires to Hurricane Ike, demonstrate that FEMA is operating effectively within the department. Congress should reject calls to make FEMA a stand-alone agency.

FEMA Has Made Considerable Progress. FEMA has taken dramatic steps—under DHS leadership—to improve federal response efforts since Hurricane Katrina. In the aftermath of the Midwest floods, citizens and government officials alike applauded FEMA for such actions as sending officials to the Midwest prior to the river's crest to work with state and local authorities. The same can be said for the California wildfires, where agency officials were immediately on the ground helping victims find assistance. Also, federal officials from across the government were brought together in a committee to tackle the wildfire problem, a significant milestone for interagency coordination.

And most recently, FEMA's response to Hurricane Ike has been lauded as a success. Not only has FEMA created more partnerships with state and local officials, but the agency has also instituted internal changes, such as more staff and better technology (including electronic tracking of trucks). These changes have led to more efficient distribution of supplies to people in need, such as delivering millions of gallons of water and meals to storm victims.

All of these successes have been accomplished under DHS leadership. And FEMA's mission is interwoven with all of the other directorates under DHS jurisdiction. Because of this current structure, the agency is able to rely upon other DHS-led agencies such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the United States Coast Guard for supplies, manpower, and expertise. DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, as a cabinet-level official, is able to go to bat for FEMA with high-ranking officials. At the same time, he acts as an ambassador to both victims and responders. For example, he recently visited Houston in the wake of Hurricane Ike, bringing comfort and optimism to hurricane victims.

Removing FEMA from DHS would simply breed confusion between DHS/FEMA roles, unduly expand government, and increase response time by adding more steps to the process. As demonstrated by Hurricane Katrina, adding more bureaucracy to an already time-sensitive process of saving American lives is an error we cannot afford to make.

The Future of FEMA. Congress cannot fall prey to those who overlook the success of FEMA or neglect to recognize its achievements for partisan reasons. Instead, it should build upon FEMA's current progress and:

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- *Establish clear requirements that limit the situations in which federal emergency declarations can be issued.* Congress should align emergency declarations with scales used for disasters, such as the Richter scale. When a disaster goes beyond the defined state and local capabilities, then and only then would FEMA step in. This ensures that precious FEMA resources are dedicated to those disasters that truly require a national response.
- *Eliminate certain types of disasters from FEMA jurisdiction.* Certain types of disasters are too localized to mobilize a federal government agency. In fact, this type of response led to gross inefficiencies that do little to help an afflicted area but waste millions in taxpayer dollars.
- *Restrict homeland security grants to funding only the 27 capabilities on the DHS Target Capabilities List (TCL).* Former FEMA head James Lee Witt emphasizes how FEMA should be moved because, in its current state, the agency is not sufficiently all-hazards oriented. But the cur-

rent DHS TCL is an all-hazards package that covers the entire spectrum of disaster response, and it is risk-based while improving disaster response from a grassroots level. This framework is more than sufficient for FEMA to cultivate an all-hazards approach within the current configuration. Subsequently, there is little reason to reinvent the wheel.

American Lives Are at Stake. Those who champion the restructure of FEMA emphasize how such a change would improve disaster relief. But FEMA did improve its performance under the leadership of DHS. To reverse all of this progress in the name of change seems like just another magic trick in the Beltway political show.

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