
Bush and Cheney Culpable

Takedown of FEMA, Disaster Planning

When the Bush-Cheney Administration took office in 2001 with a ideological determination to downsize and privatize much of the programs and services provided by the Federal government, one of its targets was the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It was almost universally acknowledged at that time, that FEMA had been transformed into one of the best-functioning government agencies during the Clinton Administration.

FEMA was established in 1979, and during the Cold War period of the 1980s, its focus was narrowed from natural disasters, to a potential nuclear attack and related continuity-of-government functions. As a result, FEMA was unable to respond quickly and adequately to East Coast hurricanes in 1989 and 1992. But after this, as even the Wall Street Journal

noted in a major report Aug. 16, 2004, the Clinton Administration revitalized FEMA, and its broadened approach “turned FEMA into an agency widely regarded as one of the government’s most effective.” What the Journal failed to acknowledge, was that it was strong Presidential leadership and support for FEMA’s mission, that made the process work.

This timeline shows what has happened to FEMA’s role and its unique capabilities since 2001, and provides the backdrop for the events described in the first timeline.

Early 2001: FEMA issues a study that identifies a hurricane of the magnitude of Category 4 or 5 striking New Orleans, as one of the three most likely disasters to happen in the U.S. The others were a terrorist attack on New York City, and an earthquake in San Francisco.

January 2001: Bush appoints Joe Allbaugh, a crony from Texas, as head of FEMA. Allbaugh has no previous experience in disaster management, but he had been Bush’s chief of staff in Texas, and manager of the Bush-Cheney campaign in 2000. Along with Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, he was known as one of the three members of the “iron triangle” of Bush’s handlers. Other politically connected individuals are also put in top positions at FEMA at this time.

On Jan. 31, the Hart-Rudman “Commission on National Security” issues its report, which includes a recommendation to incorporate FEMA, the Coast Guard, the Border Patrol, and other agencies into a new homeland security agency. The Bush-Cheney Administration initially reacts coolly to the report.

February-March 2001: The Bush-Cheney Administration launches a drive to privatize public services, including key elements of FEMA’s activities for disaster management. FEMA begins to outsource government jobs to contractors. Bush’s first Office of Management and Budget Director, Mitch Daniels, states at a conference: “The general idea—that the business of government is not to provide services, but to make sure that they are provided—seems self-evident to me,” he said.

The new Administration proposes eliminating Project Impact, a successful, Clinton-era program of loans and grants to assist localities in “mitigation”—making homes and other structures more resistant to earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes.

March-May 2001: Bush proposes cutting FEMA’s budget by 20%, including cutting mitigation grants. “They clearly are dissociating themselves from programs closely identified with the previous Administration,” says a George Washington University disaster expert. “Whether a broader philosophical process is going on is not entirely clear yet, but I suspect it is,” he says, citing proposals for shifting responsibility from the Federal government to the states.

May 2001: Bush puts Cheney in charge. On May 8, the President issues a statement on “Domestic Preparedness Against Weapons of Mass Destruction,” saying that he has asked Cheney to oversee the development of a coordinated national effort to protect the country from a weapons of mass

destruction (WMD) attack, and that he has asked FEMA to create an Office of National Preparedness, to implement the Cheney recommendations.

- At the same time, Cheney announces on CNN that he will head a task force on homeland defense, and that FEMA will devise plans and strategies to figure out how to respond to a “man-made, or man-caused” disaster in the form of a terrorist attack.

- Allbaugh confirms that FEMA will be downsized, and that localities will be on their own. “Many are concerned that Federal disaster assistance may have evolved into both an oversized entitlement program and a disincentive to effective state and local risk management,” he tells a Senate appropriations subcommittee on May 15. “Expectations of when the Federal government should be involved and the degree of involvement may have ballooned beyond what is an appropriate level,” he says.

June 2001: House Republicans cut \$389 million from the FEMA budget, over Democratic objections.

September 2001: Ten days after the 9/11 attacks, Bush creates an Office of Homeland Security to coordinate counterterrorism efforts—including FEMA—and names Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania to head it.

June 2002: The Bush Administration proposes the creation of a Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Ridge tells Congressional committees on June 20, that the Administration’s DHS proposal is the direct outcome of the planning process led by Vice President Cheney since May of 2001. Ridge says that FEMA is “at the centerpiece” of the Administration’s initiative.

July 2002: The Government Accountability Office warns that a merger of FEMA would be a “high-risk” endeavor.

- During the debate on the creation of DHS in the House, an amendment by James Oberstar (D-Minn.) to retain FEMA as an independent agency, is defeated by a vote of 165 to 261. Reps. Waxman (D-Calif.) and Obey (D-Wisc.) warn that moving FEMA into the DHS “creates the risk that [its] responsibilities will be neglected and poorly performed.” Rep. Costello (D-Ill.) says: “Without the continuation of FEMA’s independent coordinating role, we cannot ensure that the government will be able to effectively respond to and recover from disasters.”

Sept.-Oct. 2002: Bush ousts former Rep. Mike Parker (R-Miss.) as head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, after Parker testified before the Senate Budget Committee, and challenged the Administration’s \$2 billion cut in the Corps’ budget.

November 2002: During the Senate debate on DHS, Sen. Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.) says: “With the passage of this Homeland Security legislation, we will destroy the Federal Emergency Management Agency, losing years of progress toward a well-coordinated Federal response to disasters. As it now exists, FEMA is a lean, flexible agency receiving bipartisan praise as one of the most effective agencies in government. . . . I cannot understand why, after years of frustration and failure,

we would jeopardize the Federal government’s effective response to natural disasters by dissolving FEMA into this monolithic Homeland Security Department. I fear that FEMA will no longer be able to adequately respond to hurricanes, fires, floods, and earthquakes, begging the question, who will?”

December 2002: After less than two years as FEMA Director, Joe Allbaugh announces his resignation. In March 2003, he leaves FEMA, and sets up a number of lobbying firms, including Allbaugh Co., with many clients in the disaster-relief business, and New Bridge Strategies, which helps U.S. companies win reconstruction contracts in Iraq.

January 2003: Bush nominates Michael D. Brown to replace Allbaugh as FEMA Director. Allbaugh had given Brown, his former college roommate, a job in FEMA in 2001 as Deputy Director and General Counsel. Brown was a failed lawyer with a padded resume, who had no qualification to serve in FEMA at any level. He had been employed for the previous 11 years as commissioner of judges and stewards for the International Arabian Horse Association, from which he was forced to resign.

February 2003: President Bush signs Executive Order 13286 which transfers “certain functions to the Secretary of Homeland Security,” from many agencies and departments, including FEMA. As FEMA is downgraded from a cabinet-level agency and submerged in the Department of Homeland Security, its mission is refocused onto terrorism. FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program is cut in half. From FY2003 to FY 2005, \$800 million in emergency preparedness grants were transferred from FEMA to the new DHS Office of Domestic Preparedness, where they were designated for use in counterterrorism.

February 2004: Although \$20 million was needed for the Army Corps of Engineers Lake Pontchartrain and Hurricane Vicinity Project, which is still about 20% incomplete, Bush’s budget proposes only \$3.9 million. “The longer we wait without funding, the more we sink,” says project manager Al Naomi.

March 2004: Former FEMA director James Lee Witt testifies before two House subcommittees in opposition to DHS’s plan to reduce the number of FEMA regional and field offices. “I and many others in the emergency management community across the country are deeply concerned about the direction FEMA is headed.” He says there’s been erosion of the successful partnership that was built between local, state, and federal partners. “I am extremely concerned that the ability of our nation to prepare for and respond to disasters has been sharply eroded,” Witt states. “I hear from emergency managers, local and state leaders, and first responders nearly every day that the FEMA they knew and worked well with has now disappeared. In fact, one . . . told me, ‘It is like a stake has been driven into the heart of emergency management.’ ”

Summer 2004: The union local which represents FEMA employees writes to Congress complaining about cronyism, saying that this initially “took place mainly at the senior levels

of FEMA, but it has now entered into mid-level and working-level” hirings.

- FEMA privatizes its hurricane disaster plan for New Orleans, contracting it out to Innovative Emergency Management.

- The Administration makes the biggest budget cuts ever to the Army Corps of Engineers hurricane and flood-control funding for New Orleans. “It appears that the money has been moved in the President’s budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq,” states Jefferson Parish emergency management chief Walter Maestri.

- FEMA denies Louisiana’s pre-disaster mitigation funding requests.

- More than 250 emergency preparedness officials from more than 50 Federal, state, and local agencies and volunteer organizations, participate in an unique eight-day gathering, organized by FEMA. They conduct a “tabletop exercise,” a simulation of what would happen if a Category 5 hurricane were to slam into New Orleans. Their conclusion: It would be perhaps the greatest catastrophe in American history. They cited a study that “the death toll . . . in the New Orleans area could be between 25,000 and 100,000.” According to one participant, “as much as 87% of the area’s housing would be destroyed.” The report also notes the problem of debris of “human and animal corpses, including bodies washed out of cemeteries; and a mix of toxic chemicals likely to escape from businesses.”

- A major *Wall Street Journal* investigative report on Aug. 16 presents a devastating picture of the deterioration of FEMA since 2001. “FEMA’s 1,700 staffers make up barely 1% of the Homeland Security Department’s 180,000 employees. Long-serving FEMA employees, unhappy with the loss of independence and in some cases with new policies, have been leaving FEMA in droves, taking their years of experience with them. Once the highest-ranked government office for worker satisfaction, FEMA is now dead last, according to surveys conducted by labor unions and the Federal government’s Office of Personnel Management. In the most recent union survey, 60% of FEMA staffers said they would take a job elsewhere if one were offered, and 80% of respondents said they thought FEMA has become a poorer agency since joining Homeland Security.”

The *Journal* also reports that “a quiet battle is under way within the Homeland Security Department,” explaining: “On one side are former law-enforcement officials, advocating secrecy, tight security, and intelligence as the key to minimizing the trauma of any terrorist attack. On the other are firefighters and emergency managers who emphasize collaboration, information sharing, public awareness, and mitigation efforts to reduce the impact of disasters.”

March 2005: Former Clinton FEMA director James Lee Witt tells the National Hurricane Conference meeting in New Orleans, that putting FEMA under the DHS has hampered its ability to deal with hurricanes and other disasters. The arrangement “has minimized their effectiveness in respond-

ing, in planning and training, the national hurricane program, everything.” It has also reduced FEMA’s direct communication with top government leaders and created problems in sending funds where they are needed.

April 2005: David Liebersbach, president of the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) tells the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security: “All-hazards preparedness is in danger of being regarded as a thing of the past as more focus is being placed on terrorism. We must ensure that our capability to deal with many hazards, including terrorism, remains intact and that we do not shift our focus to preparedness for a single peril.”

June 2005: Funding for the New Orleans district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is cut by a record \$71.2 million. One of the hardest-hit areas is the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project, which was created after the May 1995 flood to improve drainage in Jefferson, Orleans, and St. Tammany parishes.

July 2005: *U.S. News & World Report* reports that “the American Red Cross and FEMA ranked a hurricane in New Orleans as the nation’s most dangerous natural disaster threat.”

- Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco sends a letter to President Bush on July 20, in connection with the Administration’s opposition to measures needed to reverse the deterioration of the coastland. Blanco asks Bush to visit Louisiana and see the danger for himself. Noting that budget cutting is the Administration’s goal, she pleads: “please consider the far greater costs of not addressing the catastrophic coastal land loss occurring in Louisiana, land loss that puts our nation’s energy security and economic future at risk.”

- DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff unveils his “Stage 2” review of the re-organized agencies under his control.

- NEMA president Liebersbach warns that this proposal “takes all natural disaster preparedness responsibility away from [FEMA], and puts it in a new ‘Directorate for Preparedness.’” In a letter to House and Senate committees, Liebersbach argues that FEMA’s mission of preparedness for all types of disasters has been “forgotten” at DHS, in favor of Chertoff’s emphasis on “terrorism and homeland security capabilities.”

September 2005: After FEMA’s utter failure to respond to Hurricane Katrina, dismayed former FEMA officials are quoted in the *Washington Post*. “It’s such an irony I hate to say it, but we have less capability today than we did on September 11,” says one. “We are so much less than what we were in 2000.” “We’ve lost a lot of what we were able to do then,” another senior FEMA official said.

- Other accounts note that five of the eight top positions in FEMA, are filled by persons with no experience in disaster response, whose only reason for appointment are political ties to the Bush-Cheney team.

These timelines were prepared by Edward Spannaus and Mary Jane Freeman, with the help of Richard Freeman, Christine Craig, and Anton Chaitkin.