

KATRINA: IT RESHAPED THE GULF COAST - HOW WILL IT RESHAPE WASHINGTON, D.C.?

REMARKS BY ADMIRAL THAD ALLEN COMMANDANT, UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

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Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, two of the most powerful storms in history, devastated the Gulf Coast region in 2005. These natural disasters not only destroyed lives, neighborhoods and communities but also challenged the local, state and federal governments' emergency response infrastructure.

To learn from these events and the government's response to them, The George Washington University School of Public Policy and Public Administration (SPPPA) held a symposium on December 2, 2005, which featured the following keynote address by then Vice Admiral Thad Allen, the principal federal official managing the federal government's response efforts to Hurricane Katrina. In his speech, Admiral Allen described his own efforts and the federal government's efforts to respond to the hurricanes in a timely and efficient manner. For the audience, the chance to hear Admiral Allen — who spoke from the Gulf Coast region via remote technology — provided an opportunity to hear an in-person, first-hand account of the value of public administration.

ADM. ALLEN: I'm delighted to be here this morning with you all. I think it's morning here, maybe afternoon there. I've had an interesting couple of months down here. I thought I was going to be able to do this [speech] in person, and I have to apologize for doing it remotely, but the duties down here require...my presence be here today.

What I thought I'd do today is just give you a brief overview of how I see this [the government's response] unfolding; maybe some of the major strategies [and] structural issues associated with the response. Then I'd surely be happy to respond to any questions you may have for me.

THAD W. ALLEN was appointed as the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard on March 29, 2006. Prior to this appointment, he served as the Chief of Staff, U.S. Coast Guard and Commanding Officer, Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C. He also serves as the Chairman of the Department of Homeland Security's Joint Requirements Council. In September 2005, Admiral Allen was designated the Principal Federal Official for Hurricane Katrina response and recovery activities in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Additionally, he served as the Principal Federal Official for Hurricane Rita response and recovery activities in Louisiana.

Prior to his assignment as Chief of Staff, Admiral Allen concurrently served as the Commander for the Coast Guard Atlantic Area, Fifth Coast Guard District and U.S. Maritime Defense Zone Atlantic. He also led Atlantic forces in the Coast Guard's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the past,

Admiral Allen has also commanded the Seventh Coast Guard District, directed all Coast Guard operations in South Carolina, Georgia, most of Florida and throughout the Caribbean, and served as the Coast Guard's Director of Resources. In addition, he has served on three Coast Guard cutters and held various coastal operations command assignments including Captain of the Port / Group Long Island Sound, CT; Group Atlantic City, NJ; and LORAN Station, Lampang, Thailand.

Admiral Allen graduated from the U. S. Coast Guard Academy in 1971. He holds a Master of Public Administration degree from The George Washington University and received the Distinguished Alumni Award in 2000. He also holds a Master of Science degree from the Sloan School of Management of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 2003, Admiral Allen was elected a National Academy of Public Administration Fellow.

I might just tell you how I got into the position down here, just in terms of timeline. [Hurricane Katrina] occurred down here on the 29th of August. I actually arrived on the 5th of September, which was the Monday of Labor Day. My direction at that point was to go to New Orleans and establish a forward office under the principal federal official, [who] was Michael Brown at the time, and basically coordinate the efforts on ground in and around New Orleans, including the surrounding parishes.

Later on that month, as you know, I was moved up to the principal federal official and basically shifted my office to Baton Rouge. Since that time, I've been coordinating the federal efforts across the multiple-state area that was impacted by the storm, and that [region] would be mostly Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. However, because of the dispersion of the evacuees — and I'll talk about that in a minute — I've also made trips to Texas to meet with Governor Perry [and] to Arkansas to meet with Governor Huckabee. I visited Tennessee and other locales that have helped us very much in hosting the evacuees and helping them get on with their lives. We could not have done this without a multi-state effort.

Let me just first describe what I feel are a couple of the key attributes of the event — at least [to] frame it for me strategically. I've described on numerous occasions that this [incident] was just not a hurricane or a natural disaster for the Gulf area. If it had been just a hurricane, you would have seen a wide swath of destruction from Alabama to Louisiana. But quite frankly, a great deal of the impact just from the hurricane itself would have been focused on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which has been devastated — [namely] the area from Biloxi over to Bay St. Louis, [with] very few homes sitting on the beach there anymore.

What I believe happened — well, what I know happened — was, with the back-flooding of the City of New Orleans and with the flood wall and the levee failures, a second event occurred. I've equated this event to a weapon of mass effect being used on a city without criminality... The city was already in a weakened state regarding command, control, and communications. The governance structures were being sorely tested and — right at the time when it was very difficult to notify people to evacuate further, to even

conduct basic communications — 80 percent of the city flooded. In my view, we've got a lot to learn from this event in that regard.

Particularly, I think you [could] see what happened in New Orleans as potentially being replicated in another municipality if you had a weapon of mass effect used on it that resulted in a loss of continuity of government. Those [situations] are the types of things that we're dealing with down here, and that's what transitioned it from a traditional natural disaster to what I call a hybrid event.

The National Response Plan has basically three scenarios that we train to respond to. The first one is a national security event; that would be something like the Super Bowl, the Republican National Convention and so forth, where we pre-plan and try to basically create a non-event. The second one is a natural disaster, focusing on tornadoes, hurricanes and so forth, which is basically the new version — under Homeland Presidential Security Directive 5 [HSPD-5] — of an incident that's managed under the Department of Homeland Security now, under the Stafford Act. The third one is a response to a terrorist attack.

I think what happened in New Orleans was... [that] we were positioned to deal with the hurricane and then had the second event, which was the flooding of the city, that required current operational response. I think the inability to understand that [reality] right away was probably the tipping point in the event. When I arrived in New Orleans, rather than dealing with traditional hurricane response functions, which would be individual assistance, public assistance [and] taking care of resource needs that had gone beyond the city, the parish or the state, we actually became involved in current operations. By that I mean there was still urban search-and-rescue going on. We were attempting to unwater the city. We were moving into the remains removal — that's a very sensitive, delicate issue — and trying to restore pumping capability within the pumping systems in the city. It was a much different environment than FEMA or the U.S. government, quite frankly, is traditionally used to dealing with under a natural disaster paradigm.

For that reason, when I got to New Orleans, I established the forward office there and established what is called the Incident Command System, which is a national doctrine to respond to incidents under

HSPD-5. That's quite different than a lot of previous responses in that it is traditional for FEMA to co-locate their joint field office in the state capital with the emergency management folks and kind of manage everything with the state as a partner from the state capital.

But quite clearly, what I think we learned in Katrina is that you have to forward-deploy when you have an event of this magnitude that requires on-scene coordination of federal efforts. Quite frankly...the actions that we took just before and after Hurricane Rita's landfall later that month indicated to me that [forward-deployment] was the right thing to do, because we pre-positioned forces forward and got into the Lake Charles area in southwest Louisiana quicker. I think we enhanced the response, and we served the people of Louisiana much better than we would have.

So with that in mind, we took on the business down in New Orleans of creating an incident command. We brought in the local federal agencies. And, at that point, I created what I think was a key collaboration that led to the successes that we had down there, and that was our collaboration with the Department of Defense and my personal collaboration with General Russ Honore.

General Honore and I were basically joined at the hip for weeks. We communicated anywhere from 20 to 30 to 40 times a day via phone call, satellite phone, PDA, whatever it took to make sure that he had total visibility on what I was doing, I had total visibility on what DOD was doing and that the DOD forces in support of the state and local governments were most efficiently applied. I believe that [collaboration] was the real key factor in being able to stabilize the situation down there on ground and to bring the resources needed to the efforts that were underway — most specifically, the use of DOD resources to do sweeps through the city as it was being unwatered, to look for survivors, to identify and deal with remains, and to assist the Corps of Engineers and other folks in unwatering the city and start laying the conditions for the repopulation of the city of New Orleans.

In moving up to the Baton Rouge job a week or so later, the job became a little bit more complex, because it crossed state boundaries, required me to do some travel, speak with the governors and walk the

ground in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Quite frankly, the challenges present in those three states are quite different. Some of them involved rural or resort populations. Some of them involve fishing communities. Then you have the New Orleans area, where you have a highly densely populated municipality, and [finally] the oil and gas refining industry that's in and around Louisiana.

From that standpoint, it required a lot of intergovernmental work to make sure that we were aligned with the requirements of the state and the local municipalities, who were making sure the federal efforts were directed to the right places in those states. In the course of doing that, I would probably spend two to three days a week in Baton Rouge and one or two days in either Mississippi, Alabama or sometimes Texas. In the course of the first six to eight weeks, I made a couple of very short trips back to Washington, but other than that, spent most of the time on ground down here, trying to manage those issues.

Some of these issues were extremely challenging...and had not presented themselves before in any disaster of any magnitude that we encountered in this country. One unique situation we encountered was the fact that the state of Louisiana ha[d] no state morgue or medical examiner function before Katrina, and that [office] had to be created. We actually built a state morgue to deal with remains management for the state and made a collaboration with the appointed medical examiner for the state of Louisiana. Those [issues] are the types of things that were so unusual about this response that required intense intergovernmental discussions, coordination and collaboration. In addition, making sure that the sources of funding and benefits that accrue under the Stafford Act could be most properly applied, you needed to collaborate at all levels of government. It couldn't be just the uni-dimensional, traditional relationship co-located at the state capital.

In addition to that, there were a lot of infrastructure issues to deal with, particularly in and around New Orleans. The city basically lost its land-mobile radio capabilities by which to coordinate police activities and emergency responses. Some of the early activities we were involved in [were to] try to reinstate the command-and-control capabilities, to deal with 911 services, and then to deal with how we would do

evacuations, as the city was repopulated, if that were needed.

As you know, when Hurricane Rita came ashore, the peripheral effects of that [storm] in and around New Orleans caused the second levee breach in what is called the lower Ninth Ward, and it re-flooded. So there was continual attention throughout this period to the potential threats of other significant weather that might arise and to make sure we were prepared for that.

Quite frankly, when you survey the area in and around New Orleans today and what [was] there on ground after 80 percent of the city had been flooded, it is still a very, very daunting challenge. Issues associated with debris removal and dealing with the evacuated population are two of the most pressing issues I deal with now on a day-to-day basis.

I'd like to talk just for a second about the displaced population, because I think it's a significant issue here and will be a significant issue for a while as we work through it. We evacuated about 1.5 million people from the area surrounding New Orleans, and that was the very good news. After experiences with the previous hurricane seasons, they were able to establish contraflow procedures and...successfully evacuated most of the people out of New Orleans. That was the good news.

The challenge that came associated with that [good news] was that the evacuees ultimately ended up in almost every state of the union, and our ability to reach out, find them, get them registered for FEMA benefits and then work issues like housing situations for these registrants became very, very challenging. We were dealing with a couple of sets of issues related to that. The first were congregate shelters, where people had left and were basically in open areas — gymnasiums, convention centers — sleeping on cots and so forth. Then after that we had folks that had been placed into hotel rooms [and] motel rooms...without any further plans for where they might be housed.

This [problem] was juxtaposed against a very, very significant infrastructure problem that continues to exist in Louisiana and Mississippi, and that's the lack of adequate housing for evacuees to return to. Based on the estimates that we've received, we estimate there are probably about 200,000 to 250,000 units of housing that are either uninhabitable or need significant repairs before anybody can return. There are certain areas,

such as the lower Ninth Ward and the Lakeview area of New Orleans, that are going to have to be dealt with as a neighborhood, regarding the situation on ground, prior to reentry.

That's made getting people out of congregate shelters and out of apartment buildings very, very challenging. As we move to the Thanksgiving and the Christmas holidays this year, we have community relations of folks from FEMA out canvassing the shelters and the hotels and motels, attempting to provide alternative accommodations for these families because quite frankly, if you're from an area in New Orleans or some other part of the Gulf Coast where there's going to be a significant amount of time to conduct demolition and reconstruction of the different neighborhoods, being in a hotel room is pretty much a bridge to nowhere. So the current challenge on our hands down here is to work through that issue on a family-by-family basis and find these folks transition housing to get them out of the emergency sheltering positions that they're in right now and try and stabilize their lives while they look for their long-term housing solutions; and...[determine] whether or not they can return to their communities.

I've been asked over the last few weeks what my top priorities are down here, and I've told everybody repeatedly that my three highest priorities right now are housing, housing and housing. We will continue to work this issue hard through the month of December and into January, working very hard with our partners in the surrounding states that were most impacted...including Texas, Arkansas, Georgia and Tennessee. We'll continue to do that.

Some of the interesting issues that have arisen down here that may generate some questions from the attendees have to do with, in my view, some of the interesting manifestations of federalism. What does that mean now? Is it being redefined? How would the interagencies of the federal government come together in an event like this? I think, as we look at the lessons learned and the after-action reports from Katrina...the cumulative lessons of both 9/11 and Katrina are going to cause some interesting conversations about what the proper role of the federal government [is] in these responses; how...the various federal agencies work together; how...the federal agencies interrelate to DOD; how...[the] DOD relate[s] to the National

Guard; and how...we position ourselves to be better prepared for an event like this in the future? Because I think, in the long run, we can best serve the country — best serve ourselves and best serve the citizenry — if we are more prepared for an event like this in the future. I think that not only applies to the federal government, but I think it applies clear down to the individual responsibility level in this country.

It's very clear to me from watching the hurricane season in and around the Gulf Coast that we've come to over-rely on electricity in our lives, and the fact that we lose an electrical grid becomes a crisis in and of itself, notwithstanding the other damage that may result from a hurricane or some other type of natural disaster. I think there's a big slice of individual responsibility that probably needs to be addressed as we look at the national preparedness issue.

I think we also have to look at issues regarding continuity of government, and how might we move forward in the future if [we] have an event where a weapon of mass effect or some natural disaster basically takes down a city and inhibits [our] ability to respond or the ability of the leaders to govern. I think that's a key question. Are we prepared to do that? How should we do that [and] how we might move forward?

I think also we have the elements of what I would call a continuity of society [challenge]. We're finding it's very hard to put back communities together when you don't have a permissive environment for local vendors to operate — for the Wal-Marts to come back, for the Home Depots to come back. To the extent that you can't get in your car, put gasoline in it and drive to a local store and get groceries, then you create a demand for a point-of-delivery distribution system to provide ice, water and food to residents. I think we need to think in the future about enabling capabilities in communities to allow them to be more resilient and be able to take care of some of those basic needs immediately after a storm. I think a thoughtful look at how we might prepare [the communities] would help go a long way towards helping us to do that.

As we look at the aftermath of the storm, in the next phase of my own personal life, when I return to Washington, I'll be doing an after-action report and providing that to the secretary of Homeland Security for submission further up the chain of command and

hope to be able to roll over some of the lessons learned [and the] observations of what transpired down here so we have a more vibrant and responsive national response plan. But also [so that] the country's in a much better position to be able to respond to one of these events in the future.

NOTES

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