

## Breakdowns Marked Path From Hurricane to Anarchy

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The governor of [Louisiana](#) was "blistering mad." It was the third night after Hurricane Katrina drowned New Orleans, and Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco needed buses to rescue thousands of people from the fetid Superdome and convention center. But only a fraction of the 500 vehicles promised by federal authorities had arrived.

Ms. Blanco burst into the state's emergency center in Baton Rouge. "Does anybody in this building know anything about buses?" she recalled crying out.

They were an obvious linchpin for evacuating a city where nearly 100,000 people had no cars. Yet the federal, state and local officials who had failed to round up buses in advance were now in a frantic hunt. It would be two more days before they found enough to empty the shelters.

The official autopsies of the flawed response to the catastrophic storm have already begun in Washington, and may offer lessons for dealing with a terrorist attack or even another hurricane this season. But an initial examination of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath demonstrates the extent to which the federal government failed to fulfill the pledge it made after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to face domestic threats as a unified, seamless force.

Instead, the crisis in New Orleans deepened because of a virtual standoff between hesitant federal officials and besieged authorities in Louisiana, interviews with dozens of officials show.

Federal Emergency Management Agency officials expected the state and city to direct their own efforts and ask for help as needed. Leaders in Louisiana and New Orleans, though, were so overwhelmed by the scale of the storm that they were not only unable to manage the crisis, but they were not always exactly sure what they needed. While local officials assumed that Washington would provide rapid and considerable aid, federal officials, weighing legalities and logistics, proceeded at a deliberate pace.

FEMA appears to have underestimated the storm, despite an extraordinary warning from the National Hurricane Center that it could cause "human suffering incredible by modern standards." The agency dispatched only 7 of its 28 urban search and rescue teams to the area before the storm hit and sent no workers at all into New Orleans until after the hurricane passed on Monday, Aug. 29.

On Tuesday, a FEMA official who had just flown over the ravaged city by helicopter seemed to have trouble conveying to his bosses the degree of destruction, according to a New Orleans city councilwoman.

"He got on the phone to Washington, and I heard him say, 'You've got to understand how serious this is, and this is not what they're telling me, this is what I saw myself,' " the councilwoman, Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, recalled.

State and federal officials had spent two years working on a disaster plan to prepare for a massive storm, but it was incomplete and had failed to deal with two issues that proved most critical: transporting evacuees and imposing law and order.

The Louisiana National Guard, already stretched by the deployment of more than 3,000 troops to [Iraq](#), was hampered when its New Orleans barracks flooded. It lost 20 vehicles that could have carried soldiers through the watery streets and had to abandon much of its most advanced communications equipment, guard officials said.

Partly because of the shortage of troops, violence raged inside the New Orleans convention center, which interviews show was even worse than previously described. Police SWAT team members found themselves plunging into the darkness, guided by the muzzle flashes of thugs' handguns, said Capt. Jeffrey Winn.

"In 20 years as a cop, doing mostly tactical work, I have never seen anything like it," said Captain Winn. Three of his officers quit, he said, and another simply disappeared.

Officials said yesterday that 10 people died at the Superdome, and 24 died at the convention center site, although the causes were not clear.

Oliver Thomas, the New Orleans City Council president, expressed a view shared by many in city and state government: that a national disaster requires a national response. "Everybody's trying to look at it like the City of New Orleans messed up," Mr. Thomas said in an interview. "But you mean to tell me that in the richest nation in the world, people really expected a little town with less than 500,000 people to handle a disaster like this? That's ludicrous to even think that."

Andrew Kopplin, Governor Blanco's chief of staff, took a similar position. "This was a bigger natural disaster than any state could handle by itself, let alone a small state and a relatively poor one," Mr. Kopplin said.

Federal officials seem to have belatedly come to the same conclusion. Michael Chertoff, the homeland security secretary, said future "ultra-catastrophes" like Hurricane Katrina would require a more aggressive federal role. And Michael D. Brown, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, whom President Bush had publicly praised a week earlier for doing "a heck of a job," was pushed aside on Friday, replaced by a take-charge admiral.

Russ Knocke, press secretary at the Department of Homeland Security, said that any detailed examination of the response to the storm's assault will uncover shortcomings by many parties. "I don't believe there is one critical error," he said. "There are going to be some missteps that were made by everyone involved."

But Richard A. Falkenrath, a former homeland security adviser in the Bush White House, said the chief federal failure was not anticipating that the city and state would be so compromised. He said the response exposed "false advertising" about how the government has been transformed four years after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"Frankly, I wasn't surprised that it went the way it did," Mr. Falkenrath said.

## Initial Solidarity

At midafternoon on that Monday, a few hours after the hurricane made landfall, state and federal leaders appeared together at a news conference in Baton Rouge in a display of solidarity.

Governor Blanco lavished her gratitude on Mr. Brown, the FEMA chief.

"Director Brown," she said, "I hope you will tell President Bush how much we appreciated - these are the times that really count - to know that our federal government will step in and give us the kind of assistance that we need." Senator Mary L. Landrieu pitched in: "We are indeed fortunate to have an able and experienced director of FEMA who has been with us on the ground for some time."

Mr. Brown replied in the same spirit: "What I've seen here today is a team that is very tight-knit, working closely together, being very professional doing it, and in my humble opinion, making the right calls."

At that point, New Orleans seemed to have been spared the worst of the storm, although some areas were already being flooded through breaches in levees. But when widespread flooding forced the city into crisis, Monday's confidence crumbled, exposing serious weaknesses in the machinery of emergency services.

Questions had been raised about FEMA, since it was swallowed by the Department of Homeland Security, established after Sept. 11. Its critics complained that it focused too much on terrorism, hurting preparations for natural disasters, and that it had become politicized. Mr. Brown is a lawyer who came to the agency with political connections but little emergency management experience. That's also true of Patrick J. Rhode, the chief of staff at FEMA, who was deputy director of advance operations for the Bush campaign and the Bush White House.

Scott R. Morris, who was deputy chief of staff at FEMA and is now director of its recovery office on [Florida](#), had worked for Maverick Media in Austin, Tex., as a media strategist for the Bush for President primary campaign and the Bush-Cheney 2000 campaign. And David I. Maurstad was the Republican lieutenant governor of [Nebraska](#) before he became director of FEMA's regional office in Denver and then a senior official at the agency's headquarters.

The American Federation of Government Employees, which represents FEMA employees, wrote to Congress in June 2004, complaining, "Seasoned staff members are being pushed aside to make room for inexperienced novices and contractors."

With the new emphasis on terrorism, three quarters of the \$3.35 billion in federal grants for fire and police departments and other first responders were intended to address terror threats, instead of an "all-hazards" approach that could help in any catastrophe.

Even so, the prospect of a major hurricane hitting New Orleans was a FEMA priority. Numerous drills and studies had been undertaken to prepare a response. In 2002, Joe M. Allbaugh, then the FEMA director, said: "Catastrophic disasters are best defined in

that they totally outstrip local and state resources, which is why the federal government needs to play a role. There are a half-dozen or so contingencies around the nation that cause me great concern, and one of them is right there in your backyard."

Federal officials vowed to work with local authorities to improve the hurricane response, but the plan for Louisiana was not finished when Hurricane Katrina hit. State officials said it did not yet address transportation or crime control, two issues that proved crucial. Col. Terry J. Ebbert, director of homeland security for New Orleans since 2003, said he never spoke with FEMA about the state disaster blueprint. So New Orleans had its own plan.

At first glance, Annex I of the "City of New Orleans Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan" is reassuring. Forty-one pages of matter-of-fact prose outline a seemingly exhaustive list of hurricane evacuation procedures, including a "mobile command center" that could replace a disabled city hall.

New Orleans had used \$18 million in federal funding since 2002 to stage exercises, train for emergencies and build relay towers to improve emergency communications. After years of delay, a new \$16 million command center was to be completed by 2007. There was talk of upgrading emergency power and water supplies at the Superdome, the city's emergency shelter of "last resort," as part of a new deal with the tenants, the New Orleans Saints.

But the city's plan says that about 100,000 residents "do not have means of personal transportation" to evacuate, and there are few details on how they would be sheltered.

Although the Department of Homeland Security has encouraged states and cities to file emergency preparedness strategies it has not set strict standards for evacuation plans.

"There is a very loose requirement in terms of when it gets done and what the quality is," said Michael Greenberger, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Law and director of the Center for Health and Homeland Security. "There is not a lot of urgency."

As Hurricane Katrina bore down on New Orleans, Mayor C. Ray Nagin largely followed the city plan, eventually ordering the city's first-ever mandatory evacuation. Although 80 percent of New Orleans's population left, as many as 100,000 people remained.

Colonel Ebbert decided to make the Superdome the city's lone shelter, assuming the city would only have to shelter people in the arena for 48 hours, until the storm passed or the federal government came and rescued people.

As early as Friday, Aug. 26, as Hurricane Katrina moved across the Gulf of Mexico, officials in the watch center at FEMA headquarters in Washington discussed the need for buses.

Someone said, "We should be getting buses and getting people out of there," recalled Leo V. Bosner, an emergency management specialist with 26 years at FEMA and president of an employees' union. Others nodded in agreement, he said.

"We could all see it coming, like a guided missile," Mr. Bosner said of the storm. "We, as staff members at the agency, felt helpless. We knew that major steps needed to be taken fast, but, for whatever reasons, they were not taken."

## **Drivers Afraid**

When the water rose, the state began scrambling to find buses. Officials pleaded with various parishes across the state for school buses. But by Tuesday, Aug. 30, as news reports of looting and violence appeared, local officials began resisting.

Governor Blanco said the bus drivers, many of them women, "got afraid to drive. So then we looked for somebody of authority to drive the school buses."

FEMA stepped in to assemble a fleet of buses, said Natalie Rule, an agency spokeswoman, only after a request from the state that she said did not come until Wednesday, Aug. 31. Greyhound Lines began sending buses into New Orleans within two hours of getting FEMA approval on Wednesday, said Anna Folmsbee, a Greyhound spokeswoman. But the slow pace and reports of desperation and violence at the Superdome led to the governor's frustrated appeal in the state emergency center on Wednesday night.

She eventually signed an executive order that required parishes to turn over their buses, said Lt. Col. William J. Doran III, operations director for the state Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

"Just the logistics of wrangling up enough buses to get the people out of the dome took us three days," Colonel Doran said. A separate transportation problem arose for nursing homes. In some cases, delays proved deadly.

State regulations require nursing homes to have detailed evacuation plans and signed evacuation contracts with private transportation companies, according to Louisiana officials.

Yet 70 percent of the New Orleans area's 53 nursing homes were not evacuated before the hurricane struck Monday morning, according to the Louisiana Nursing Home Association. This week, searchers discovered 32 bodies in one nursing home in Chalmette, a community just outside New Orleans.

Mark Cartwright, a member of the nursing home association's emergency preparedness committee, said 3,400 patients were safely evacuated from the city. An unknown number of patients died awaiting evacuation or during evacuation.

"I've heard stories," Mr. Cartwright said. "Because rescuers didn't come, people were succumbing to the heat." Mr. Cartwright said some nursing home managers ignored the mayor's mandatory evacuation order, choosing to keep their frail patients in place and wait out the storm.

## **Symbols of Despair**

The confluence of these planning failures and the levee breaks helped turn two of the most visible features of the New Orleans skyline - the Superdome and the mile-long convention center - into deathtraps and symbols of the city's despair.

At the Superdome, the initial calm turned to fear as a chunk of the white roof ripped away in the wind, dropping debris on the Saints' fleur-de-lis logo on the 50-yard-line. The electricity was knocked out, leaving only dim lights inside the windowless building. The dome quickly became a giant sauna, with temperatures well over 100 degrees.

Two-thirds of the 24,000 people huddled inside were women, children or elderly, and many were infirm, said Lonnie C. Swain, an assistant police superintendent overseeing the 90 policemen who patrolled the facility with 300 troops from the Louisiana National Guard. And it didn't take long for the stench of human waste to drive many people outside.

Chief Swain said the Guard supplied water and food - two military rations a day. But despair mounted once people began lining up on Wednesday for buses expected early the next day, only to find them mysteriously delayed.

Chief Swain and Colonel Ebbert said in interviews that the first buses arranged by FEMA were diverted elsewhere, and it took several more hours to begin the evacuation. By Friday, the food and the water had run out. Violence also broke out. One Guard soldier was wounded by gunfire and the police confirmed there were attempts to sexually assault at least one woman and a young child, Chief Swain said.

And even though there were clinics at the stadium, Chief Swain said, "Quite a few of the people died during the course of their time here."

By the time the last buses arrived on Saturday, he said, some children were so dehydrated that guardsmen had to carry them out, and several adults died while walking to the buses. State officials said yesterday that a total of 10 people died in the Superdome.

"I'm very angry that we couldn't get the resources we needed to save lives," Chief Swain said. "I was watching people die."

Mayor Nagin and the New Orleans police chief, P. Edwin Compass III, said in interviews that they believe murders occurred in the Superdome and in the convention center, where the city also started sending people on Tuesday. But at the convention center, the violence was even more pervasive.

"The biggest problem was that there wasn't enough security," said Capt. Winn, the head of the police SWAT team. "The only way I can describe it is as a completely lawless situation."

While those entering the Superdome had been searched for weapons, there was no time to take similar precautions at the convention center, which took in a volatile mix of poor residents, well-to-do hotel guests and hospital workers and patients. Gunfire became so routine that large SWAT teams had to storm the place nearly every night.

Capt. Winn said armed groups of 15 to 25 men terrorized the others, stealing cash and jewelry. He said policemen patrolling the center told him that a number of women had been dragged off by groups of men and gang-raped - and that murders were occurring.

"We had a situation where the lambs were trapped with the lions," Mr. Compass said. "And we essentially had to become the lion tamers."

Capt. Winn said the armed groups even sealed the police out of two of the center's six halls, forcing the SWAT team to retake the territory.

But the police were at a disadvantage: they could not fire into the crowds in the dimly lit facility. So after they saw muzzle flashes, they would rush toward them, searching with flashlights for anyone with a gun.

Meanwhile, those nearby "would be running for their lives," Capt. Winn said. "Or they would lie down on the ground in the fetal position."

And when the SWAT team caught some of the culprits, there was not much it could do. The jails were also flooded, and no temporary holding cells had been set up yet. "We'd take them into another hall and hope they didn't make it back," Capt. Winn said.

One night, Capt. Winn said, the police department even came close to abandoning the convention halls - and giving up on the 15,000 there. He said a captain in charge of the regular police was preparing to evacuate the regular police officers by helicopter when 100 guardsmen rushed over to help restore order.

Before the last people were evacuated that Saturday, several bodies were dumped near a door, and two or three babies died of dehydration, emergency medics have said. State officials said yesterday that 24 people died either inside or just outside the convention center.

The state officials said they did not have any information about how many of those deaths may have been murders. Capt. Winn said that when his team made a final sweep of the building last Monday, it found three bodies, including one with multiple stab wounds.

Capt. Winn said four of his men quit amid the horror. Other police officials said that nearly 10 regular officers stationed at the Superdome and 15 to 20 at the convention center also quit, along with several hundred other police officers across the city.

But, Capt. Winn said, most of the city's police officers were "busting their asses" and hung in heroically. Of the terror and lawlessness, he added, "I just didn't expect for it to explode the way it did."

### **Divided Responsibilities**

As the city become paralyzed both by water and by lawlessness, so did the response by government. The fractured division of responsibility - Governor Blanco controlled state agencies and the National Guard, Mayor Nagin directed city workers and Mr. Brown, the

head of FEMA, served as the point man for the federal government - meant no one person was in charge. Americans watching on television saw the often-haggard governor, the voluble mayor and the usually upbeat FEMA chief appear at competing daily news briefings and interviews.

The power-sharing arrangement was by design, and as the days wore on, it would prove disastrous. Under the Bush administration, FEMA redefined its role, offering assistance but remaining subordinate to state and local governments. "Our typical role is to work with the state in support of local and state agencies," said David Passey, a FEMA spokesman.

With Hurricane Katrina, that meant the agency most experienced in dealing with disasters and with access to the greatest resources followed, rather than led.

FEMA's deference was frustrating. Rather than initiate relief efforts - buses, food, troops, diesel fuel, rescue boats - the agency waited for specific requests from state and local officials. "When you go to war you don't have time to ask for each round of ammunition that you need," complained Colonel Ebbert, the city's emergency operations director.

Telephone and cellphone service died, and throughout the crisis the state's special emergency communications system was either overloaded or knocked out. As a result, officials were unable to fully inventory the damage or clearly identify the assistance they required from the federal government. "If you do not know what your needs are, I can't request to FEMA what I need," said Colonel Doran, of the state office of homeland security.

To President Bush, Governor Blanco directed an ill-defined but urgent appeal.

"I need everything you've got," the governor said she told the president on Monday. "I am going to need all the help you can send me."

"We went from early morning to late night, day after day, after day, after day. Trying to make critical decisions," Ms. Blanco said in an interview last week. "Trying to get product in, resources, where does the food come from. Learning the supply network."

She said she didn't always know what to request. "Do we stop and think about it?" she asked. "We just stop and think about help."

FEMA attributed some of the delay to miscommunications in an overwhelming event. "There was a significant amount of discussions between the parties and likely some confusion about what was requested and what was needed," said Mr. Knocke, the spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security.

As New Orleans descended into near-anarchy, the White House considered sending active-duty troops to impose order. The Pentagon was not eager to have combat troops take on a domestic lawkeeping role. "The way it's arranged under our Constitution," Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld noted at a news briefing last week, "state and local officials are the first responders."

Pentagon, White House and Justice officials debated for two days whether the president should seize control of the relief mission from Governor Blanco. But they worried about the political fallout of stepping on the state's authority, according to the officials involved in the discussions. They ultimately rejected the idea and instead decided to try to speed the arrival of National Guard forces, including many trained as military police.

Paul McHale, the assistant secretary of defense for homeland security, explained that decision in an interview this week. "Could we have physically moved combat forces into an American city, without the governor's consent, for purposes of using those forces - untrained at that point in law enforcement - for law enforcement duties? Yes."

But, he asked, "Would you have wanted that on your conscience?"

For some of those on the ground, those discussions in Washington seemed remote. Before the city calmed down six days after the storm, both Mayor Nagin and Colonel Ebbert lashed out. Governor Blanco almost mocked the words of assurance federal relief officials had offered. "It was like, 'they are coming, they are coming, they are coming, they are coming,' " she said in an interview. "It was all in route. Everything was in motion."

### **'Stuck in Atlanta'**

The heart-rending pictures broadcast from the Gulf Coast drew offers of every possible kind of help. But FEMA found itself accused repeatedly of putting bureaucratic niceties ahead of getting aid to those who desperately needed it.

Hundreds of firefighters, who responded to a nationwide call for help in the disaster, were held by the federal agency in Atlanta for days of training on community relations and sexual harassment before being sent on to the devastated area. The delay, some volunteers complained, meant lives were being lost in New Orleans.

"On the news every night you hear, 'How come everybody forgot us?' " said Joseph Manning, a firefighter from Washington, Pa., told The Dallas Morning News. "We didn't forget. We're stuck in Atlanta drinking beer."

Ms. Rule, the FEMA spokeswoman, said there was no urgency for the firefighters to arrive because they were primarily going to do community relations work, not rescue.

William D. Vines, a former mayor of Fort Smith, Ark., helped deliver food and water to areas hit by the hurricane. But he said FEMA halted two trailer trucks carrying thousands of bottles of water to Camp Beauregard, near Alexandria, La., a staging area for the distribution of supplies.

"FEMA would not let the trucks unload," Mr. Vines said in an interview. "The drivers were stuck for several days on the side of the road about 10 miles from Camp Beauregard. FEMA said we had to have a 'tasker number.' What in the world is a tasker number? I have no idea. It's just paperwork, and it's ridiculous."

Senator Blanche Lincoln, Democrat of [Arkansas](#), who interceded on behalf of Mr. Vines, said, "All our Congressional offices have had difficulty contacting FEMA. Governors' offices have had difficulty contacting FEMA." When the state of Arkansas repeatedly offered to send buses and planes to evacuate people displaced by flooding, she said, "they were told they could not go. I don't really know why."

On Aug. 31, Sheriff Edmund M. Sexton, Sr., of Tuscaloosa County, Ala., and president of the National Sheriffs' Association, sent out an alert urging members to pitch in.

"Folks were held up two, three days while they were working on the paperwork," he said.

Some sheriffs refused to wait. In Wayne County, Mich., which includes Detroit, Sheriff Warren C. Evans got a call from Mr. Sexton on Sept. 1. The next day, he led a convoy of six tractor-trailers, three rental trucks and 33 deputies, despite public pleas from Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm to wait for formal requests.

"I could look at CNN and see people dying, and I couldn't in good conscience wait for a coordinated response," he said. He dropped off food, water and medical supplies in Mobile and Gonzales, La., where a sheriffs' task force directed him to the French Quarter. By Saturday, Sept. 3, the [Michigan](#) team was conducting search and rescue missions.

"We lost thousands of lives that could have been saved," Sheriff Evans said.

Mr. Knocke said the Department of Homeland Security could not yet respond to complaints that red tape slowed relief.

"It is testament to the generosity of the American people - a lot of people wanted to contribute," Mr. Knocke said. "But there is not really any way of knowing at this time if or whether individual offers were plugged into the response and recovery operation."

## **Response to Sept. 11**

An irony of the much-criticized federal hurricane response is that it is being overseen by a new cabinet department created because of perceived shortcomings in the response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. And it is governed by a new plan the Department of Homeland Security unveiled in January with considerable fanfare.

The National Response Plan set out a lofty goal in its preface: "The end result is vastly improved coordination among federal, state, local and tribal organizations to help save lives and protect America's communities by increasing the speed, effectiveness and efficiency of incident management."

The evidence of the initial response to Hurricane Katrina raised doubts about whether the plan had, in fact, improved coordination. Mr. Knocke, the homeland security spokesman, said the department realizes it must learn from its mistakes, and the department's inspector general has been given \$15 million in the emergency supplemental appropriated by Congress to study the flawed rescue and recovery operation.

"There is going to be enough blame to go around at all levels," he said. "We are going to be our toughest critics."

Jason DeParle, Robert Pear, Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker contributed reporting for this article