



**FEMA and Disaster: A Look at What Worked
and What Didn't From a FEMA Insider**

Leo Bosner



truthout

The Federal Emergency Management Agency - FEMA - became an object of derision as it appeared to sit by helplessly as thousands suffered and died in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

But many have forgotten that FEMA responded quickly and effectively to countless emergencies and disasters during the 1990s. Earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, the Oklahoma City Bombing, all saw a swift response from FEMA, a sharp contrast to FEMA's performance after Hurricane Katrina.

Leo Bosner worked at FEMA for nearly 30 years, from the time of the agency's establishment in 1979 until his retirement in 2008. I have known Leo for 21 years and really appreciated the work he did inside the bureaucracy, often at the risk of his own job, to make this vital agency work. We are lucky to have someone with so much experience let us in on how FEMA worked or didn't work through five presidents. In this four-part Solutions series, Bosner traces the development of FEMA during those years and offers his observations as to why a government agency like FEMA would perform so well one time and so poorly the next ... and his ideas on the key factors that can lead FEMA to success in the future.

Leo Bosner was an employee of FEMA from 1979 until his retirement in 2008 and at the time of his retirement was president of the FEMA Headquarters employees' union, AFGGE Local 4060. The views expressed here are Mr. Bosner's personal views only.

-Dina Rasor, Solutions editor

On April 19, 1995, at a few minutes past nine in the morning local time, terrorists exploded a deadly bomb in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. There had been no warning of the event, no weather forecasts to predict this the way one would predict a natural disaster such as a hurricane or a flood.

To the extent that Americans worried about terrorist attacks in 1995, they generally worried about the attacks taking place in Washington or in New York, San Francisco, or some other iconic American city. Not Oklahoma City.

Nonetheless, when news of the attack appeared on the TV screens, FEMA acted quickly. Within minutes of the TV news broadcast, phones and pagers were going off all over FEMA Headquarters in southwest Washington, DC. The Emergency Support Team has been activated: Report to your duty stations. Twenty-four-hour coverage at FEMA's emergency support center will begin immediately. All hands report in.

Meanwhile, in Denton, Texas, FEMA's Region VI Office had activated its own emergency operations center as well.

Well and good for FEMA, but what about some help for Oklahoma City? What could be done and who would make the decision to do it? The division director in charge of emergency response was out of town on travel. No problem ... his deputy moved quickly, activating FEMA's emergency operations center and talking by phone with FEMA's Regional Office in Denton as well as Oklahoma officials to determine exactly what help would be needed from FEMA.

It was soon apparent that the most needed asset from FEMA would be help in looking for possible survivors beneath the concrete rubble of the bombed-out building. The deputy gave the order and FEMA Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Task Forces from Phoenix, Arizona, and Sacramento, California, were deployed to Oklahoma City. The two task forces mobilized their people, gathered their gear and headed out. By 11:00 that night, both task forces had arrived in Oklahoma City. Eventually, 11 FEMA US&R task forces would be deployed to Oklahoma City to help in the search for survivors.

Total time elapsed since the bombing:

*FEMA Region VI Emergency Operations Center activated - about 30 minutes.

*FEMA staff deployed to Oklahoma City - about 45 minutes.

*First US&R task forces deployed - about two hours.

*First US&R task forces arrive in Oklahoma City - about 14 hours.

Fast-forward ten years later, to August 2005. Hurricane Katrina, a devastating storm, has crossed Florida and entered the Gulf of Mexico and is on a trajectory to strike New Orleans. But this time, unlike at Oklahoma City, there is plenty of warning. The National Weather Service has been tracking the storm and is projecting its likely path. And on Saturday morning, August 27, FEMA's National Situation Report (NSR), which goes out to top federal officials every day at 5:30 AM, Eastern time, featured the storm prominently. The storm was projected to hit New Orleans 48 hours later, on Monday morning.

Forty-eight hours warning time was 48 hours more than FEMA had before the Oklahoma City bombing. In fact, one year earlier, FEMA representatives sat down with Louisiana officials in a major exercise called "Hurricane Pam," and discussed and planned just how FEMA and other agencies would work together should a major hurricane hit New Orleans.

Forty-eight hours advance warning ... one year's advance planning ... ten years' experience since Oklahoma City. Surely, FEMA's response to Katrina would be quick, decisive and effective.

There is no need to even try to recount the whole sad story of FEMA's response to Katrina here ... the indecisiveness, the delays, the lost opportunities have all been well-documented elsewhere. Many of FEMA's staff at this time had also worked for the agency during the response to Oklahoma City, but this time, they could only watch in anger as their efforts were pushed aside by the higher-ups, as straightforward warnings like the August 27 NSR were virtually ignored at the senior levels of government. As one frustrated FEMA staffer put it, "We might as well have been sending our reports directly to the shredder."

What went wrong? How did the agency that came to the rescue so quickly after the Oklahoma City bombing become the gang that couldn't shoot straight after Hurricane Katrina?

Since its establishment in 1979, FEMA has flashed in and out of America's field of vision several times, sometimes seen as a rescuer, sometimes as a buffoon. What is FEMA supposed to do, anyway ... stop terrorists? Rescue hurricane survivors? Clean up oil spills? And how can the same government agency seem to do such a good job one time and such a terrible job the next?

FEMA 1979-1992: An Agency in Search of a Mission

FEMA came into being on April 1 1979. The agency was established as an effort to give states a sort of one-stop-shopping at the federal level in case of disaster.

Up until then, a state governor faced with an overwhelming earthquake, hurricane, or other disaster might have had to make dozens of phone calls to a laundry list of military and civilian offices to seek out a range of federal help. This was because the various federal offices in charge of preparing, responding to, recovering from and preventing disasters were scattered across the federal government. To make things worse, when these offices interacted with each other, the interaction could often be characterized as competition rather than as cooperation.

So, in 1979, staffs of entire offices were lifted out of their parent agencies - Defense, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, and others - and brought together in a new agency called "FEMA."

At first, confusion could be found in abundance. Exactly what was this new agency supposed to do? How were staff supposed to work as a team with people from offices they had never heard of before ... or with whom they had often been in conflict? What was a person with this new job title "Emergency Management Specialist" supposed to do, exactly?

The agency's first Director, John Macy, did his best to bring together a mass of squabbling, ill-fitting components into a single agency, but in addition to the obvious difficulties of such a task, Macy faced one insurmountable problem: bad timing.

In 1979, the Carter administration was beginning to draw to a close and Carter himself was becoming less and less popular as a president. So, while Macy struggled to bring FEMA up to speed and even to

define just what FEMA was, his administration was on the way out. In November 1980, less than two years after FEMA was established, Jimmy Carter lost his bid for re-election to Ronald Reagan.

In January 1981, as the Reagan administration begins, it becomes increasingly clear that a major theme will be: Carter was wrong about everything. Placate the Soviets? Wrong. Solar power? Wrong. Social welfare programs? Wrong. FEMA ...?

FEMA, now less than two years old, was still searching for its identity when Hurricane Reagan hit the agency. More and more military officers were seen daily signing in at the guards' desk. Director Macy was replaced by Louis Giuffrida, a retired Army officer. As the Reagan administration took an increasingly confrontational public stance against the Soviets, FEMA under Giuffrida took a similar approach. Coordinating the response to natural disasters was becoming less and less important. FEMA's real mission? Prepare for "The Big One," the nuclear war with the Soviets.

FEMA would be an early version of TV hero Jack Bauer, fighting hard to save America from external threats. The problem was, the US government already had plenty of Jack Bauers at the FBI, the CIA and the Defense Department ... and they had no love for this upstart FEMA that would suddenly dash to the front of the line and grab all the glory for our country's defense.

So FEMA, facing public anger from the anti-nuclear-war left, also faced disdain from the federal intelligence and law enforcement establishment. The agency soon became known as the "Turkey Farm," where politically reliable (but not very skilled) political appointees would be sent to play their war games while the real action took place elsewhere.

To be sure, there were some bright spots in the FEMA leadership ... Jeff Bragg, who established an employee performance management system in the Federal Insurance Administration, Sam Speck, who headed FEMA's State and Local Programs Directorate and who understood the value of reaching out to our non-federal partners instead of trying to order them around.

But leaders like Bragg and Speck were badly outnumbered by high-level opportunists, who saw a federal appointment as a chance to fatten their wallets, extend their power, even make a few sexual conquests. By 1985, FEMA faced public ridicule and had been racked by internal scandals ... sex

scandals, money scandals, you name it. Giuffrida stepped down as head of the agency. His replacement was Julius Becton.

Becton was a retired Army general with combat leadership experience in Korea and Vietnam. Before coming to FEMA, he had headed up the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Becton knew something about the realities of war as well as natural disasters. He was also a natural leader. Where Giuffrida had been an aloof, behind-the-scenes operator, Becton made it a point to meet with FEMA staff at "All-Hands" meetings, to hear people's concerns and to project a new image for FEMA: the days of scandal and opportunism were over; FEMA would function as a real government agency.

But while Becton certainly brought personal integrity to FEMA, he was still faced with the fact that FEMA was struggling to find its true mission. A nuclear face-off with the Soviets was appearing less and less likely, and it had been a long time since the US had to contend with a large-scale natural disaster. What, exactly, was FEMA there for?

Becton left the agency at the end of the Reagan administration. President George H.W. Bush, whose administration began in 1989, did not even bother to appoint a new FEMA Director. To Reagan, FEMA had been one of the front-line tools to be employed in America's hard-line stance against the Soviets. To Bush, FEMA was apparently an afterthought.

But not all the blame was on the Republican side. In 1989, it appeared to many leaders on the left and on the right that a major natural disaster in the US was simply an unlikely prospect. I once spent my lunch hour telling a news reporter that FEMA had been sadly neglecting preparedness for natural disasters. The reporter could barely stifle a yawn. What he really wanted to hear about was FEMA's "secret plan" to take over the country and put liberals into concentration camps.

So, FEMA was still a joke, a would-be secret agent in a world where the Soviet threat had largely disappeared and in a country that was considered to be immune to large-scale disasters.

Until 1989, that is.

On September 21, 1989, Hurricane Hugo struck the coast of South Carolina with winds over 100 mph and a 20-foot storm surge. Damages were devastating, FEMA's response was perceived as being slow

and ineffective and Sen. Fritz Hollings of South Carolina called FEMA a "bunch of bureaucratic jackasses." Bush had still failed to appoint anyone to head FEMA. When asked by a reporter why there was no director at FEMA, Bush replied "I don't know."

The Bush administration promised that it had learned its lesson, that FEMA would be strengthened, but it appeared to many insiders that Bush's people considered Hurricane Hugo to be an aberration, an event unlikely ever to occur again. And if another disaster did occur? When the Loma Prieta earthquake hit California a month later, President Bush put his "Master of Disaster" in charge of coordinating federal relief operations ... no, not anyone from FEMA, but the White House Deputy Chief of Staff Andrew Card.

In August 1990, nearly a full year after Hurricane Hugo, Bush finally appointed a new Director at FEMA, Wallace Stickney, a Republican transportation official from New England who had no experience with large-scale disasters. Unlike the highly visible Julius Becton, Stickney kept a low profile, even within his own agency. Many FEMA staff would say that they had never actually seen their director and that they did not even know what he looked like.

But it didn't matter. For the next two years, things were still relatively quiet, no major catastrophic disasters in the US. FEMA could remain a small, obscure federal agency where people did whatever it was they did. All was well with the world, and in the summer of 1992, Bush was considered by many to be a shoo-in for re-election over the young upstart Gov. of Arkansas Bill Clinton.

But in late August 1992, barely two months before the upcoming presidential election, disaster struck Florida and Louisiana ... and the Bush administration. It was called Hurricane Andrew and its impact was even greater than Hugo's had been three years earlier. Where Hugo had caused an estimated \$7 billion in damages in the US, Andrew's estimated US damages would exceed \$20 billion.

FEMA was once again caught flat-footed, with neither a viable plan nor seasoned leadership to deal with the crisis. As the government's lack of response became more and more a political embarrassment, news media began to take a closer look at FEMA.

It soon became apparent that FEMA's problems were at the top of the agency and that the efforts of ordinary FEMA staffers to help the situation were ignored. One FEMA employee reported that she had

been vacationing in Florida when the hurricane hit and had quickly phoned back to Washington, offering to get to work right away helping the disaster's survivors: I'm here in Florida, she said, I've got my FEMA ID, I'm packed for travel, I've got a rental car! Where should I go? What should I do?

Why, finish up your vacation and come home, was the answer.

Election Day came and the Bush administration was turned out of office, in part by angry voters who were incensed at the government's mishandling of the response to Hurricane Andrew. President-Elect Clinton's transition team was soon at work reviewing government operations from top to bottom to develop policy recommendations for the new administration that would take office in January. Given the physical as well as the political impacts of Hurricane Andrew, one question would not go away:

What do we do with FEMA?

Sources: In addition to drawing on his own experience for this article, the author wishes to acknowledge:

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Part Two: FEMA and Disaster: A Look at What Worked and What Didn't From a FEMA Insider (1993 - 2000)

Leo Bosner

"FEMA has developed a sterling reputation for delivering disaster-relief services, a far cry from its abysmal standing before James Lee Witt took its helm in 1993." -Atlanta Journal-Constitution editorial, February 12, 1996

In the fall of 1992, following the debacle of Hurricane Andrew and the election of a new administration, it appeared to many that FEMA's days were numbered. One newspaper story told of the difficulty of even finding anyone willing to head the agency. The headline read, "What to Do With FEMA?"

But barely three years later, in 1996, FEMA's reputation would grow to the point where the president would elevate FEMA Director James Lee Witt to Cabinet status in recognition of how much the agency had improved.

And less than ten years after *that*, in 2005, FEMA would once again be held up as an object of scorn and ridicule for its many perceived failures in Hurricane Katrina.

How could a single, small government agency be seen as being so terrible ... and then so great ... and then so terrible again, all in the span of a few years?

When Bill Clinton was elected to the Oval Office in November 1992, the government's fumbled response to Hurricane Andrew was much too recent - and too embarrassing - to be relegated to the back burner. Clinton had narrowly won a somewhat unexpected electoral victory over the incumbent President, George H.W. Bush. Many people thought that Bush's defeat was due in part to his administration's failure in the eyes of the voters to respond effectively after Hurricane Andrew. If so, the new administration would obviously not wish to repeat such an error.

So, what to do with FEMA? Some called for abolishing the agency altogether and giving its mission to the military. Others pointed out that disaster management was a more complex matter than simply send-

ing in the troops and anyway, the military might have one or two other priorities besides disaster response.

Clinton decided to keep FEMA and to name as its head a fellow Arkansan, James Lee Witt. Witt had served Governor Clinton as the Arkansas state director of Emergency Management, and now he would follow Clinton to Washington to perform a similar task at the federal level as FEMA director.

Witt took over as head of FEMA in April 1993. On his first official day on the job, Witt stood by the guards' desk at the entrance of FEMA headquarters shaking hands with the somewhat startled FEMA employees as they trudged toward the elevators: "How do you do, I'm James Lee Witt ... How do you do, I'm James Lee Witt ... How do you do ... " For employees who had seldom if ever actually met a FEMA director, this was certainly a change.

Over the next eight years, Witt, a high school graduate who had gotten his start repairing roads and bridges in Arkansas, would completely redevelop FEMA. One way of analyzing how he did this is to consider four important "P's" of public administration: People, Programs, Public Relations and Power.

First, "People." When Witt took over at FEMA in 1993, employee morale could only be described as being at rock bottom. The agency had often been held up to public ridicule during the heyday of nuclear civil defense and now was an object of contempt following its seeming indifference to the plight of Hurricane Andrew's many victims.

But the employees of FEMA felt they were getting a bad rap. Why should they be blamed for the mistakes and failures of their bosses? FEMA employees wanted to support the agency's mission, but found themselves pushed aside or ignored when they tried to do so. Moreover, many of the staff believed that their own bosses lacked management skills, knowledge of disasters or just plain human empathy, and were themselves part of the problem.

On April 14, 1993, after barely two weeks in office, Witt issued a succinct, one-page memo to all FEMA employees. The title of the memo was "Open Door Policy," and it stated in plain language that any FEMA employee who could not get a problem resolved within his or her normal chain of command was welcome to meet face to face, one on one, with Director Witt. No forms to fill out, no permission required from your boss, no minimum grade level ... just dial up Witt's executive assistant and make an

appointment. Staff began to meet with Witt and he began to hear firsthand how disorganized things were within the agency.

He was told, for example, that most FEMA employees were neither trained nor rostered ahead of time for disaster duty, meaning that sending FEMA employees to work at a disaster was a bit like a game of pickup basketball. (Immediately after the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, for example, when FEMA staff were desperately needed in California, a FEMA supervisor was seen running breathlessly from one employee's desk to the next ... "Can you go to California ... Can you ... How about you?" Any staffer who evenly hesitantly nodded yes was told, "Quick, go home and pack and fly to San Francisco. Someone will tell you what to do when you get there.")

Witt also heard endless tales of supervisors who abused and mistreated their staff. In one office, ten of the 11 staff members met with Witt, begging to be transferred to a different office and away from their current boss.

As Witt learned more about his people, his people were learning more about him. Witt was businesslike and decisive, but he was also plainspoken and unpretentious. Any staffer running into Witt standing in line at the local deli was free to talk with him, in fact, was expected to. When meeting with employees in his office, Witt would listen intently, often while chewing tobacco and spitting the juice into a foam cup he held in his hand. (One long-time Washington staffer came away from such a meeting much taken aback, believing that Witt had been spitting into his coffee.)

Witt soon made staff understand that FEMA was a team, that team members were expected to do their jobs, that team members were to respect each other and that he, Witt, was not an outsider ... he was the team captain.

Morale was visibly improving within the agency, but strengthening the "People" factor at FEMA would not be enough. "Programs" were next. Flip charts of blank paper began appearing next to the elevators, with FEMA employees invited to write their own ideas for strengthening the agency. How can we respond better to disasters? How can we better serve the American people? How can we make FEMA a better agency?

Bit by bit, changes began to appear. For example, the "Federal Response Plan" already existed, but was considered by most to be a "paper plan" only. That is, FEMA offices as well as other federal agencies might make numerous commitments within the plan for what they would do in a disaster, but in reality, would not have sufficient staff or resources to actually carry out those promises. Under Witt, the plan would become real - any and all commitments or promises for disaster response must be backed up by the necessary staff, funds and legal authorities to actually do the job if and when called upon to do so.

The Federal Response Plan, or FRP, would remain the key to FEMA's successful disaster responses for the next eight years. The backbone of the FRP consisted of 12 "Emergency Support Functions," or ESFs. The ESFs were simply a list of the 12 main types of jobs the federal government might have to perform during a disaster response:

1. Transportation
2. Communications
3. Public Works and Engineering
4. Firefighting
5. Information and Planning
6. Mass Care
7. Resource Support
8. Health and Medical Services
9. Urban Search and Rescue
10. Hazardous Materials
11. Food
12. Energy

From there, each ESF would be assigned a lead federal department or agency having the most expertise in that particular field and disaster response planners within that agency would focus *only* on that ESF. So, for example, ESF number 1, "Transportation," would be assigned to the US Department of Transportation (USDOT). Disaster planners at USDOT would be told to plan for all the transportation-related aspects of disaster response, how to transport federal responders to and from the disaster site, how to prioritize the repair of damaged transportation infrastructure in the disaster area, and so forth. But *don't*

worry about medical care, food or electrical power; another agency with another ESF will take care of each of those tasks.

The concept was simple, but it worked. Each federal agency would focus on its own specialty in disasters and FEMA would orchestrate the entire effort like a traffic cop directing traffic to avoid gridlock. In addition to making things better organized, an added benefit was that FEMA would actually economize disaster response by drawing on existing resources of the federal government wherever possible. (A foreign visitor to FEMA, who had seen news reports of the federal government's disaster relief efforts, asked where FEMA kept the airplanes it used to carry in relief supplies after a disaster. The answer: We don't *have* airplanes at FEMA; we know where to get them.)

At the same time as the FRP was being brought into the real world, FEMA staff themselves were at long last being trained and rostered for disaster duty, so that in the event of a major incident, everyone would know what he or she was expected to do. There would be no more "paper plans" at FEMA and disaster response would no longer be a game of pickup basketball. So, when terrorists bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that April morning in 1995, the plans and the people were in place and the response was quick and effective.

So, "People" and "Programs" were moving ahead. What about "Public Relations"?

Public relations (PR) had long been a disaster in itself at FEMA. An agency swamped with scandals and incompetent leaders was an obvious and tempting target for journalists, so FEMA under previous administrations had kept the press at arm's length, which only increased the suspicion in the news media as to what was going on inside FEMA.

But good or bad PR was more than a minor issue for FEMA. If FEMA was to be effective in carrying out its mission, it had to give advice to the public as well as to state and local government agencies on what to do (or not do) during a disaster. If FEMA had credibility, the advice would in all likelihood be followed. But if not ...?

Witt moved boldly, reaching out to the news media and inviting them to send reporters and cameras right into FEMA's emergency operations center during a disaster response so the reporters could see for themselves what was being done. They could even interview FEMA staff if they liked ... on camera!

The plan worked. Reporters now had access to FEMA and they could see (and report) what FEMA staff were doing to respond to the flood, the hurricane or whatever disaster was occurring. FEMA staff suddenly felt appreciated, eager to tell the reporters about their work. TV viewers across the country now could see for themselves what FEMA was doing on their behalf.

And Witt himself was there, too, sometimes even participating in live, call-in radio shows during disaster operations, fielding questions that ranged from the intelligent to the absurd. One fearful caller asked Witt if it was true that FEMA staff "carrying guns" had been dispatched to a flood-stricken area! Witt calmly explained, No, FEMA staff were not armed, but once a FEMA Disaster Recovery Center was established to give out financial aid to flood victims, naturally the Center would have armed security guards, as would any public building. Another caller angrily observed that the FEMA staff on camera at the emergency operations center "are all walking around drinking coffee. Why aren't they working?" the caller demanded. Witt patiently explained that it was a shift change, that employees who had been working a 12-hour night shift were now handing off their work to the incoming day shift ... and yes, they were drinking coffee while doing so.

Throughout his tenure at FEMA, Witt continued to support an approach to the news media that was as open as possible, knowing full well that it would at times be frustrating, but that in the long run, it would make his job easier and would make FEMA more effective.

So, "People," "Programs" and "PR." What about "Power"?

Witt had been Bill Clinton's state disaster director when Clinton was governor of Arkansas, so most people both inside and outside of FEMA considered Witt to be personally close to the president, not just a big donor or someone who was owed a job in Washington, but a person who actually had the president's ear when it came to disasters.

One story that made the rounds was of a senior federal official who balked at supplying FEMA's request for his agency's assets during a hurricane response. Witt was reputed to have phoned the official and said, "If those assets don't arrive soon, the next call you get will be from the White House and you won't like it." FEMA got the assets.

Was the story true? No one seemed to know for sure, but what was important was people *thought* the story was true and so FEMA generally got the cooperation it needed from other federal agencies during disasters. As they say in Washington, the perception of power is itself power.

By the end of Witt's tenure at FEMA, the agency had been completely transformed. Staff morale was high, response plans were in place and FEMA enjoyed a reputation for competence and professionalism. Government representatives from other countries regularly trekked to FEMA seeking to learn the agency's formula for success.

While such a "formula" may be difficult to define, much less replicate, I believe that the following factors would be key to the success of a modern emergency management agency in the US or in any other country:

1. A lead agency with competent leadership, well-trained staff, a clearly-defined mission, enabling legislation, an adequate budget and visible proximity and direct access to the president or other chief executive.
2. Partnership and cooperation among national government agencies, state and local governments, the private sector, the nonprofit sector, private citizens and international partners in other countries.
3. Respect and support for existing state and local emergency response organizations such as emergency services offices, fire departments, police departments, emergency medical services, and other response organizations.
4. A program that includes the four interdependent and cyclical phases of emergency management:
 - *Mitigation*, to prevent future disasters and/or reduce their impacts, for example, through disaster-resistant building codes,
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 - *Preparedness*, to train and prepare for future disasters, for example, through training and written guidance for emergency responders,

- *Response*, to act quickly and provide assistance when disaster occurs, for example, by establishing and using practical response plans and
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- *Recovery*, to help rebuild in the weeks, months and years after the disaster, for example, through financial aid to individuals and municipalities to rebuild, but this time to rebuild stronger and better, thus returning to the first phase of the cycle, Mitigation.

5. A comprehensive approach that takes in all potential aspects of the disaster response such as transportation, mass care, health and medical services, and the other jobs described in the 12 ESFs.

6. An understanding that information management and resource coordination are key to any disaster response.

7. Responsiveness and openness to questions from the public and from the news media, along with a proactive (and honest) program of public information outreach and public education about disasters.

8. Systems to protect the safety and health of disaster workers.

9. The willingness to learn from disaster experience, including our own mistakes, in order to continually upgrade and improve the emergency management system.

By the time Witt stepped down at the end of the Clinton administration in January 2001, FEMA was a rare federal agency that enjoyed high regard from the public and high morale among its own staff. When I was asked at the time how FEMA would fare under President-elect George W, Bush, I stated what seemed obvious to many within FEMA: Nothing much was likely to change. Republicans and Democrats alike had come to appreciate the value of a professionally managed, competent emergency management agency. FEMA was a smooth-running machine and all George Bush need do was to appoint a competent, experienced Republican emergency manager to take over from Witt. FEMA would continue to function and would never again sink to the level of incompetence and disrepute it had experienced in the 1980s.

Or so I thought.

Part Three: FEMA during the Bush years(2001 - 2004)
Leo Bosner

On January 20, 2001, George W. Bush was inaugurated as the 43rd president of the United States. Across the government, agency heads who had been appointed by President Clinton resigned to make room for the appointees from the new administration.

At FEMA in Washington, DC, Director James Witt said a few last goodbyes and left the FEMA Headquarters building after nearly eight years on the job. He and his team had taken FEMA from being an object of scorn and ridicule to being one of the most respected agencies in the US government. The Midwest Floods, the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Northridge Earthquake, one hurricane after another, although not perfect (what ever is?), this eight-year period had shown that the federal government could do something right and it was FEMA's most effective era since its inception in 1979.

What would come next?

While the incoming Bush administration preached moderation and cooperation, government insiders could already sense that major changes were coming. Immediately after every election of a new president, but well before the inauguration, groups of individuals known as "transition teams" fan out across the federal bureaucracy. These teams represent the president-elect, until he takes office in January. Their mission, as their name implies, is to begin meeting with senior federal officials, agency by agency, to be briefed on what each agency had been doing to ensure a smooth transition to the new administration in January.

Transition team members are chosen for their professional expertise and, perhaps more importantly, for their close political ties with the incoming administration. In other words, the team members are expected to understand the workings of their assigned agency, but they are also expected to represent the thinking and philosophy of the incoming president.

Shortly after the November 2000 election, members of the Bush transition team arrived at FEMA to meet with senior FEMA officials of the outgoing Clinton administration. One of the FEMA officials

later recalled the meeting: As long as the conversation centered on things like FEMA's work with NATO, or civil-military coordination, or anything that was related to military defense, the Bush team members were sitting forward and taking notes. But when the discussion turned to FEMA's role in responding to natural disasters, the team members sat back and sipped their coffee. The FEMA official finally asked them, *Why aren't you paying more attention? This is what FEMA does.* One of the team members smiled indulgently. *It's really all just blue smoke and mirrors,* he said. *If there's a disaster, all you need at FEMA is somebody in a suit handing a check to the state governor in front of the TV cameras.*

Yes, changes were coming at FEMA.

The first big change would come in the person of the new FEMA Director, Joseph Allbaugh. Unlike Witt, Allbaugh had no substantial disaster experience, but he had been Bush's presidential campaign manager, so he was clearly aligned with the thinking of the new administration.

One of the first signs of this thinking came in the abolition of Project Impact.

Project Impact was one of Witt's proudest accomplishments at FEMA. Established in 1997, Project Impact brought together local government leaders, volunteer groups, private businesses and individual citizens to assess their communities' vulnerabilities to disaster and develop innovative and cost-effective ways to prevent or reduce the risk of damage before the disaster occurred. According to FEMA:

"... nearly 200 communities and more than 1,000 business partners are involved in Project Impact, which promotes total community involvement and thrives on the energy and partnerships generated by committed individuals, businesses and local leaders. Any community can become a disaster resistant community ... building disaster-resistant communities saves lives and prevents damage. In the process, it saves money as well. Current statistics show that for every dollar spent on prevention, at least two dollars are saved on disaster repairs."

- "Project Impact: Building A Disaster-Resistant Community," FEMA Press Release Number 1293-71, November 22 1999

What happened next is succinctly described by two top FEMA officials under the Clinton administration, FEMA Chief of Staff Jane Bullock and White House liaison to FEMA George Haddow:

"Upon taking office in 2001, the Bush administration began to deconstruct FEMA. It was assumed that a program like Project Impact, which focused on individual and private-sector responsibility, would thrive under a Republican administration. Instead it was eliminated as not being effective and funding for other natural disaster mitigation programs was dramatically reduced."

- Bullock and Haddow, "Introduction to Homeland Security," Elsevier Publishing, 2006, page 508.

Ironically, on February 28, 2001, the day after Project Impact was to be terminated, the Puget Sound area of Washington State was struck by the 6.8 magnitude Nisqually earthquake. The city of Seattle was hard hit, but Seattle had been a Project Impact community and the mayor of Seattle was soon on television stating that Seattle's participation in Project Impact had prevented his city from receiving more serious damage from the quake.

But the facts on the ground didn't really count. In the Alice-in-Wonderland climate in Washington, DC, political agenda trumped reality and Project Impact was terminated.

Throughout 2001 and 2002, the deconstruction of FEMA continued, slice by slice. Under Witt, the agency had built up a strong, professional workforce, which, by all accounts, performed admirably in the response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, The ESFs that had been developed under Witt were de-emphasized, their training neglected and their positions left unfilled. In my own office, a ten-person team charged with federal response planning was allowed to get smaller and smaller by attrition: each time a staffer left to retire or to take a job elsewhere, he or she would not be replaced, so the ten-person planning team gradually became the nine-person team, became the eight-person team ...

FEMA staff were able to soldier on for awhile, but in March 2003, the hammer fell. FEMA lost its status as an independent agency and became part of the newly-established Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

In conversations with Congressional staffers years later, I would learn one reason this was done. Many in Congress at the time considered FEMA to be a rare "success story" in the federal bureaucracy and had

intended that FEMA would serve as a model for the rest of DHS. DHS would study and then replicate FEMA's approach to emergency management, applying FEMA's systemic (and successful) way of thinking to the war on terror.

But this optimistic scenario did not take into account the Bush administration's apparent indifference (if not outright hostility) to FEMA and its mission. To be sure, FEMA had responded to terrorist incidents as far back as 1995, when we responded to assist with the search for survivors after the Oklahoma City bombing, but FEMA's response focused on rescuing survivors, not on capturing terrorists. FEMA response teams might carry first-aid kits, but they did not carry guns.

In a sense, FEMA was like a fire-and-rescue department, while DHS was like a police department. If FEMA and DHS could have worked together as co-equal partners, America might then have had a doubly strong system that would be truly "all hazards."

But that was not to be. FEMA was not an equal partner with DHS; FEMA was under DHS, an organization whose leaders and staff made little attempt to hide their disdain for FEMA.

The effects of FEMA going under DHS were felt almost immediately:

- Some of FEMA's best and most experienced mid-level executives were abruptly relieved of their duties and reassigned to Homeland Security, which was perceived by many of them as the equivalent of being dropped into a black hole. Some went quietly, others found jobs elsewhere, but either way, FEMA was quietly being stripped of some of its best leaders.
- My work on developing a training course for FEMA's disaster response managers was ordered stopped immediately and draft plans for the course were shelved.
- The team of experienced FEMA disaster response planners (of which I was a member), who had begun writing the new National Response Plan (NRP) were ordered to hand our work over to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for completion. TSA then passed the project on to a private contractor. The contractor, a well-known national consulting firm, would then spend months drafting what many of us at FEMA considered to be a highly unreadable and impractical

NRP that would eventually become one of the government's most visible marks of failure in Hurricane Katrina.

Entire components of the agency were transferred away to other parts of Homeland Security and eventually the use of the name "FEMA" itself was prohibited: We were now the "Emergency Preparedness and Response" directorate of Homeland Security, or "EP&R" for short. When I later attended a meeting at Homeland Security, I signed in as "Leo Bosner, FEMA." I noticed afterward that someone had dutifully crossed out "FEMA" and had written in "EP&R" in its place.

That meeting, my first with people from Homeland Security, was an eye-opener for me. Many of the attendees seemed to be young folks fresh out of college, who appeared pleased and thrilled to be part of this important effort. While I was glad that my new colleagues were so enthusiastic, I had hoped that they might also be a bit more experienced.

But on the other hand, when I introduced myself to one of the more "experienced" Homeland Security staffers and said that I worked in federal response planning, his comment was, "If we do our jobs right and prevent these kinds of incidents [the September 11 attacks], we won't have any need for response." I then asked him what his plan was for preventing floods, earthquakes and hurricanes.

After that, I was not invited to any more meetings at Homeland Security.

Throughout 2003 and 2004, FEMA's capabilities continued to deteriorate and many of the agency's best professionals left in disgust. Training was cut back. Vacant positions were left unfilled. Contractor-generated disaster response plans bore no connection to reality. (I can still remember one section of the contractor-generated draft National Response Plan that claimed that, in a major disaster, the Department of Homeland Security would "take command" of local responders such as police and fire departments. Our whole office at FEMA had a laugh at that one ... in a disaster, local police and fire chiefs might be glad to have some help from the Feds, but they are not eager to hand over "command" of their departments to a bunch of strangers from Washington.)

In March, 2004, former FEMA Director Witt testified at a Congressional hearing. According to Witt:

"I am extremely concerned that the ability of our nation to prepare for and respond to disasters has been sharply eroded ... 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 state emergency manager told me 'it is like a stake has been driven into the heart of emergency management.' ... They are concerned that the successful partnership that was built and honed over many years between local, state and federal partners and their ability to communicate, coordinate, train, prepare and respond has gone down hill. And they are at a loss as to how to work with the federal government now and fear for their communities should a catastrophic disaster occur."

- March 24, 2004, oral testimony of former FEMA Director James Lee Witt before the House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations and the House Subcommittee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources and Regulatory Affairs.

If Witt was concerned about FEMA, so were the FEMA employees, who understood clearly that their ability to do their jobs was being undermined daily by mismanagement at the top. Following Witt's Congressional testimony, the FEMA Headquarters employees' union, AFGE Local 4060, sent a six-page letter to selected members of the House and Senate. The letter was drafted by our union's Executive Board (of which I was a member) and signed by the union's President, Pleasant Mann . The letter gave a few examples of the kinds of problems that were occurring regularly at FEMA:

"In one case, FEMA employees from across the country, including myself, were flown to the National Hurricane Center in Florida to attend a training course that, as it turned out, did not yet exist. Cost to the taxpayers for this needless travel: about \$30,000. When I complained to the DHS Inspector General [IG] about this waste of funds, I was told by the IG staff that the IG received so many complaints that they could not possibly investigate one where 'only' \$30,000 had been wasted. (One FEMA staffer later joked, "Now we know how much we can get away with!")

In another case, FEMA advertised a GS-14 job available, salary in the \$100,000 range, for a program manager for the National Disaster Medical System. According to the job advertisement, the successful candidate would have experience in "preparing written reports and analyzing

organizational and operational problems." Nowhere in the advertisement was there any requirement that the applicant know anything about disasters, or anything about medical systems.

- Contractors were continually being brought into FEMA to "observe" and "assist" with agency programs. Full-time FEMA staff were assigned to train and familiarize the contractors with the programs. Then, after his or her training was completed, a job would be advertised with work specifications tailored to the contractor, who would then be hired to supervise the FEMA employees who had provided the original training. "

It was becoming crystal clear that FEMA was being packed with political cronies and inexperienced newbies, while long-time emergency managers were being edged aside, and employee morale at the agency was plummeting. In an employee survey that had been conducted by the union in February 2004 and which was cited in Mann's letter to Congress:

- "60% of the respondents said they would probably leave FEMA and take another job if one were offered.
- 74% of the respondents said they would probably retire immediately if they were eligible to do so.
- 80% of the respondents said they thought FEMA has become a poorer agency since joining the Department of Homeland Security. "

Mann pleaded with the senators and representatives to take action before it was too late. He concluded his letter with the following statement:

"The American people count on FEMA to be there to pick up the pieces after a hurricane, a terrorist attack, or any type of emergency. FEMA employees are willing and able to do that, but our capability is being drained away and it may soon be gone unless timely action can be taken to remedy these problems." "

Mann's words would prove to be sadly prophetic: His letter to Congress was dated June 21, 2004, a little more than a year before Hurricane Katrina would strike the Gulf Coast.

Then, in the fall of 2004, a series of devastating hurricanes hit Florida. With an election looming in November and memories still fresh of Bush senior's 1992 electoral defeat following Hurricane Andrew, the Bush administration seemed determined to show an appearance of decisive action on the part of FEMA.

Florida soon found itself flooded, not with water, but with droves of FEMA employees who had been dispatched to the state - far in excess of the number actually needed to provide disaster assistance. I was one of those sent to Florida, and in one meeting that I attended, those of us who lacked work assignments were told to put on our FEMA hats, rent cars and drive around aimlessly so that "people can see that FEMA is here." One FEMA employee would later tell me that his "work assignment" consisted mainly in checking on the well-being of friends and family of high-level federal officials.

FEMA top management, especially the political appointees, seemed determined to act quickly and visibly before the election. Staff were told that people must be gotten out of shelters and into more permanent housing before Election Day. In one such hurry-up scenario, I was assigned to quickly help get hundreds of hurricane evacuees moved into a vacant mobile home park.

It was only after we had moved the evacuees in that we learned why the mobile home park had been vacant in the first place: The lake at its center was reported to be infested with alligators. (After a bit of arguing, I was able to persuade FEMA officials to at least fence in the lake before someone's child disappeared.)

Meanwhile, millions of dollars in disaster relief money were being handed out, often with little or no justification. Floridians receiving such quick help from FEMA were thrilled and many of them praised the agency's quick response, but the Florida news media would soon report another side to the rushed distribution of FEMA funds. According to the South Florida Sun-Sentinel:

""Florida lawmakers Tuesday called for state and federal investigations into how the government approved about \$28 million in Hurricane Frances claims for new furniture, clothes and appliances for residents of Miami-Dade County, which was barely touched by the storm.

"The federal Emergency Management Agency 'made a lot of mistakes and wasted a lot of taxpayer money,' said US Rep. Clay Shaw, R-Fort Lauderdale. In a letter Tuesday, Shaw asked

the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, which oversees FEMA, to conduct a hearing.

"Committee spokesman Ken Johnson said Shaw raised "legitimate concerns," and that the panel's chairman, Christopher Cox, R-Calif., will review the request.

"Meanwhile, US Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton, said he will ask the government Accountability Office, the watchdog arm of Congress, to investigate. State Sen. Walter "Skip" Campbell, D-Fort Lauderdale, called for a criminal investigation."

-"Legislators Urge FEMA Inquiry Over Miami-Dade Payments," by Sally Kestin and Megan O'Matz, Staff Writers, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, posted November 24, 2004. "

Far more FEMA staff than were needed were sent to Florida, and audits would eventually show that far more federal money than was needed was handed out. No matter. FEMA had put on a very expensive (and wasteful) show of disaster relief and Bush had won another four years in office. One FEMA staffer would later ruefully comment, "I feel like I work for a branch of the president's re-election committee."

But how well would FEMA respond to disasters now that the election was over?

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Part Four: Hurricane Katrina and Beyond
Leo Bosner

Friday afternoon, August 26, 2005, was a pleasantly warm summer day in Washington. It was my day off from duty as a Watch Officer at FEMA's National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) and my wife and I had gone to see a show of Japanese prints at an art gallery near Dupont Circle. We had just left the gallery and were discussing possible restaurants for a Friday night dinner when my FEMA pager buzzed. These were still my pre-cell phone days, so I borrowed my wife's phone to call in to the NRCC and see what was up.

My co-worker Matt picked up on the first ring. It seemed that an Atlantic storm had crossed south Florida and entered the Gulf of Mexico, where it could endanger Louisiana, Mississippi, and other states along the Gulf. The NRCC was being activated and I was to report in for night shift at 7 PM. The storm had been given a name: "Hurricane Katrina."

I thanked Matt and told him I would be in at 7:00. I was not especially worried. We had gone through some tough lessons at FEMA over the years ... Hurricane Hugo, Hurricane Andrew, the Northridge Earthquake, the Oklahoma City Bombing ... and they all pointed in the same direction: For a good emergency response, you must maintain the basics: Realistic plans; adequate resources; trained staff; good communications; and, most of all, decisive, knowledgeable leaders at the top.

But as the Katrina tragedy played out in the coming days and weeks, I would come to realize just how badly my agency, FEMA, had been hollowed out in the preceding four years and how much we had lost in that short span of time.

I arrived at the NRCC a little before 7:00 that evening, received my briefing from the day shift and got myself a cup of coffee from the kitchen. The NRCC itself was nothing fancy ... a couple of large, beige-colored rooms filled with desks, phones, computers and a few TV sets tuned in to various news stations. It had a pair of washrooms; a drinking fountain; and a small kitchen with a fridge, microwave and coffee-maker. The whole thing was located inside FEMA Headquarters in Washington in a typically bland-looking office building a couple of blocks from the National Air and Space Museum.

The NRCC might be described as FEMA Headquarters' "911 center." It was staffed constantly, with 7-7 day shifts and 7-7 night shifts on duty every day (and night) of the year, monitoring news and weather for any actual or potential disasters, answering the phone 24/7 and keeping FEMA's leadership aware of anything that might require a FEMA response.

Normal NRCC staffing was just three people: a Watch Officer like myself, usually a long-time FEMA employee who knew the agency and understood what would be needed in a disaster; and two Watch Analysts, computer-savvy specialists who monitored news and weather outlets worldwide as well as reports from FEMA staff in the Regional Offices across the country to prepare situation reports for the higher-ups at FEMA and other federal agencies.

Daily and nightly, the NRCC sent out a lot of reports, many of them just short emails to update the bosses on anything ranging from spring flooding in New England to a chemical plant fire in the Midwest. But the "main event" was the daily National Situation Report, or NSR for short. In the coming days, the NSR would clearly document what FEMA had done - and not done - as Katrina approached the Gulf Coast. These reports, although public documents, would later be removed from public view by FEMA, so it is worth an aside to explain a bit about the NSR.

The NSR was a daily executive summary of potential or actual disasters that affected the US. In essence, it was FEMA's morning briefing report regarding impending or ongoing disasters. The NSR would vary in length day to day, anywhere from about four to eight pages. It was written as much as possible in plain, non-jargon English, appearing a bit like an in-house newsletter. It generally led off with any hazardous weather warnings, then possibly a "headline" story about any impending or ongoing disaster and finally a summary of ongoing federal disaster operations in the field, if any.

The NSR was prepared overnight and sent out by email at 5:30 each morning to top officials at FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Defense Department, and other agencies throughout the government as well as to key organizations like the American Red Cross. Weekdays, weekends, Christmas morning ... the report had to go out at 5:30 AM. If it didn't, the Watch Officer's phone would soon start to ring with callers from Homeland Security, the Defense Department, and other agencies asking: Where is the NSR?

The NSR was not classified as secret. It was and still is, a public document and was posted on the FEMA web site, accessible to anyone to see, at <http://www.fema.gov/emergency/index.shtm>. If you click this web site today, you can read all of FEMA's daily NSRs going back to 2005 ... all except for the Hurricane Katrina NSRs. They have been removed from the web site. (Being on the cautious side, I saved electronic copies of two critical Katrina NSRs before they could be destroyed and they can be reviewed below)



National Situation Report

As of 5:30 a.m. Saturday, August 27, 2005

This information is provided as a public service. Information presented is considered public information and may be distributed or copied. Use of appropriate byline/photo/image credits is requested. Published daily by the FEMA National Response Coordination Center (NRCC). Available on the internet at: <http://www.fema.com/emanagers/natsitup.shtml>. For questions or comments, call the NRCC at (202) 646-2828/4541 (staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week).

Homeland Security Threat Level:

ELEVATED ■ ■ ■ ■

NOTE: New NRCC website (<http://online.fema.net/neoc/>), which is located behind the firewall, is available while under reconstruction. Many of the links are working and reflect current information. Please check back often. Comments should be sent to: FEMA-NRCC@dhs.gov.

Katrina Becomes a Category Three Hurricane, Aims Towards Northern Gulf Coast

At 5 a.m. EDT, the eye of Hurricane Katrina was located by radar near latitude 24.4 north and longitude 84.4 west, about 435 miles southeast of the mouth of the Mississippi River and about 165 miles west of Key West, Florida.

Katrina is moving toward the west-northwest near 7mph and a gradual turn to the west and west-northwest is expected during the next 24 hours.

Maximum sustained winds have increased to near 115 mph with higher gusts. Hurricane force winds extend outward up to 40 miles from the center and tropical storm force winds extend outward up to 150 miles. Estimated minimum central pressure is 963 mb or 28.44 inches.



Katrina is now a Category Three hurricane and some strengthening is forecast during the next 24 hours. Reconnaissance aircraft data indicates that the Katrina has also become a larger hurricane.



National Situation Report

As of 5:30 a.m. Sunday, August 28, 2005

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Homeland Security Threat Level:

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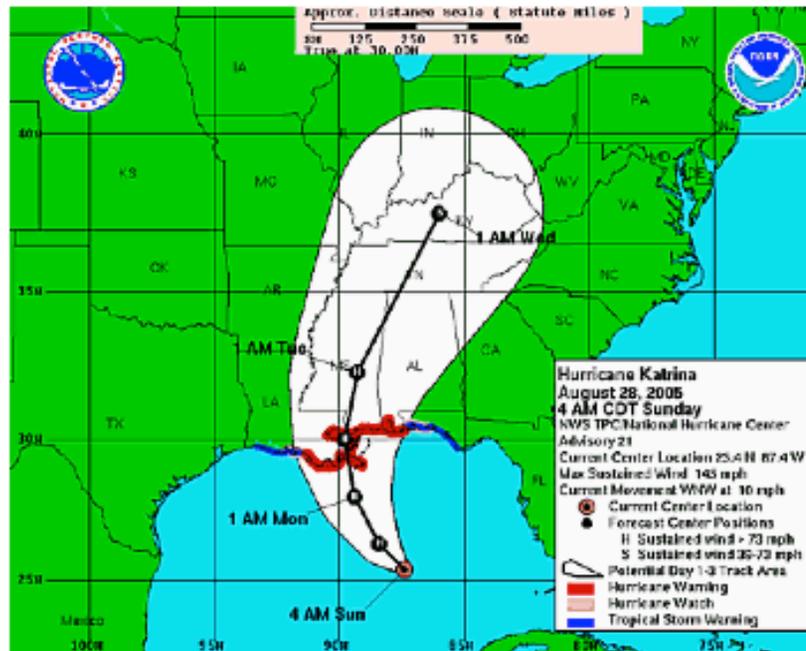
Dangerous Category Four Hurricane Katrina Continues West- Northwestward But Expected To Turn Northward

A Hurricane Warning is in effect for the North Central Gulf Coast from Morgan City Louisiana eastward to the Alabama/Florida border including the city of New Orleans and Lake Pontchartrain.

A tropical storm warning and a hurricane watch are in effect from east of the

Alabama/Florida border to Destin, Florida and from west of Morgan City to Intracoastal City, Louisiana.

At 5 am EDT (0900z), a Tropical Storm Warning has been issued from Destin Florida eastward to Indian Pass, Florida and from Intracoastal City, Louisiana westward to Cameron, Louisiana.



Producing the morning NSR was a major focus of any FEMA Watch Officer working the night shift and it was certainly on my mind as things got under way on that Friday night in August 2005. With Katrina entering the Gulf Coast, the NRCC had gone to a full activation. The two cavernous rooms that normally saw a skeleton staff of three now saw all of its chairs filled and desktop computers running as upwards of 100 staff began working day and night shifts at the NRCC.

While many of these staff worked for FEMA, about half of them worked for other federal agencies or for the American Red Cross, in a simple but effective system that had come to fruition under Witt in the '90s.

The concept was this: In a major disaster, federal agencies across the Washington area would begin activating their disaster centers to manage their own particular roles in the response. The Department of Health and Human Services might activate its disaster center to alert and deploy doctors and nurses to a disaster-stricken area if needed. The Transportation Department might activate *its* center to find out which disaster-damaged roads and bridges were in urgent need of repair. The Defense Department would certainly activate its center to be prepared to respond to requests for military aircraft to bring needed supplies into a disaster-stricken area.

But who would coordinate the activities among all of these various centers so that the disaster response did not turn into a massive federal government traffic jam? How would we make sure that we did not end up sending the same aid to one place three times while ignoring other places in need? How would we prioritize the many requests for help to ensure that the most urgent needs were filled first?

That's where FEMA's NRCC came in.

With a major disaster on the horizon, FEMA would alert the other federal agencies and the American Red Cross; those agencies would activate their own disaster centers, as mentioned above, but would also send a few staff over to the FEMA NRCC. Those staff would stay constantly in touch with their own agencies' disaster centers and would, thus, serve as a conduit of information between FEMA and the rest of the government and the Red Cross, ensuring that everyone knew what everyone else was doing and enabling top federal officials to make informed and unified decisions regarding the disaster response. In

this way, there was instant communication across the government and we could ensure that the disaster survivors would quickly receive whatever aid they needed.

Once the system was activated, once all the disaster specialists from FEMA, Defense, Transportation, the Red Cross, and other sundry agencies got to work, it would be smooth sailing at the NRCC. All you needed then would be top federal officials who knew how to make informed and unified decisions in a disaster. But as we were soon to learn, that type of person was now in very short supply.

As we began operations that Friday night for Hurricane Katrina, I don't think many of us at the NRCC were worried. A lot of us had done this before - I myself had served on disaster activations for over ten years - and we knew how the system worked. We began to gather information on the storm, its likely impacts and the status of operations at the local, state and federal levels.

We worked through the night, and at 5:30 AM Saturday, August 27, we sent out our morning NSR to all the agency heads, including the heads of FEMA and DHS. Our report didn't pull any punches. We let everyone know that Katrina had strengthened, that it was expected to get stronger still and that it was headed north through the Gulf of Mexico headed straight for the Gulf Coast.

At 7 AM Saturday, we handed things off to the day shift and went home to get some sleep, all of us thinking that the wheels would begin to roll now that we had issued our warning. But when we reported back in for duty Saturday evening, we were astonished at how little was being done to prepare for the storm. Almost everything coming out of FEMA seemed to be aimed at "standing by," "getting ready," and the like. Decisive actions - such as evacuating the large numbers of people who did not have cars - were simply not being taken.

On Saturday night, we did more information gathering for our report. Sunday morning, August 28, we issued another NSR at 5:30 AM - this one showing that New Orleans was directly in the path of the storm and advising our bosses that at least 100,000 people lacked transportation to escape the city.

Our report once again seemed to fall on deaf ears. On Monday morning, August 29, the storm hit the Gulf Coast and our worst fears were realized. Our leaders at FEMA and DHS had lost two precious days when they could have been taking robust action ahead of the storm; now, they had to play catch-up and FEMA's failures in that regard have been well-documented.

But was it really FEMA's failure? Many of the FEMA staff like myself had worked at FEMA during our "glory days" of the 1990s, when FEMA was renowned as a fast, effective agency responding to disasters. Why was it now so slow?

For starters, FEMA under DHS had been forced to throw away its clear, workable disaster response plans in favor of a confusing set of plans that no one understood. When FEMA was still an independent agency, it responded to disasters under the Federal Response Plan, the "FRP." The FRP had clear lines of authority and specified exactly what was to be done in a disaster. No plan is perfect, but the FRP had served us well in numerous disasters.

But under DHS, the FRP had now been replaced by something called the "National Response Plan," or "NRP." The NRP had been written by DHS contractors, with very little involvement from FEMA disaster professionals. It was complicated and hard to understand, something you definitely do not want in a disaster.

As Hurricane Katrina bore down on the Gulf Coast, lines of authority under the NRP were unclear, a sure death blow to any emergency plan. For example, under the old FRP, a Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) from FEMA was in charge of federal disaster responders in the field. Every federal responder in the field knew that and understood that the FCO was calling the shots.

But under the NRP, while there was still an FCO from FEMA, now there was also a Principal Federal Official (PFO) from DHS, who would do ... well, no one quite knew what, exactly. As the disaster unfolded, it was unclear who was in charge of which things at the federal level ... the FCO or the PFO. As a result, the NRP was confusing and almost useless and added to the delays in responding to the storm.

Even worse, FEMA was now operating under DHS, so instead of getting our orders from the seasoned disaster veterans like Witt or Lacy Suiter, who had run FEMA in the 1990s, our orders now came from managers at DHS who had no experience in disasters. In the middle of the Katrina response, phone calls to the NRCC from these DHS managers would continually interrupt the work of the FEMA employees with a barrage of questions which clearly were not related to the emergency response, but to speechwriting for DHS executives, distracting the FEMA employees from their emergency work.

For example, on one night during the Katrina response, there was a discrepancy in the number of people who had reportedly been rescued from the flood waters that day in a particular locale. The discrepancy was small ... maybe one report said that 35 people had been rescued and another report said it was 40. In the confusion of a disaster, such a discrepancy would be normal and it did not really matter. The fact was, about 35 to 40 people had been rescued from flood waters that day in that particular area.

But "about 35 to 40 people" was not good enough for DHS. I was working my shift at the NRCC that night and a staff person at DHS phoned me at about 2:00 in the morning and ordered me to phone down to Louisiana, wake up some people on the federal rescue team and have them send in a more exact number immediately.

These rescue team members were firefighters and medics who had been doing hard, dangerous rescue work for about 15 hours or more and were now getting a little sleep before going out to do more rescues and I was ordered to wake them up to fix some numbers in a report.

I was not permitted to refuse an order from DHS, so I said O.K., I'll call them right away. I hung up the phone, waited about ten minutes and then I phoned back to DHS. Sorry, I said, the phone lines to the rescue team are all down because of the hurricane, so my call could not get through. I promised to keep trying and hung up the phone. In truth, I never even attempted to phone the rescue teams. I was not going to wake up exhausted rescuers in the middle of the night just to get some numbers for a speechwriter.

Ironically, it was response units like FEMA's Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) teams - the ones I was told to awaken from their sleep for the sake of the DHS speechwriters - that actually operated very effectively in the field once they were deployed. The US&R teams, along with other field responders from FEMA and other federal agencies, worked tirelessly to rescue and assist thousands stranded by flood waters after the disaster. Unfortunately, their heroic efforts were overshadowed by the delays and errors back in Washington.

And then there were the contractors.

As mentioned earlier, FEMA staff levels had declined drastically since the DHS takeover of 2003. Now, with a major disaster under way, FEMA was, naturally, short staffed.

No problem. Several major contracting companies would supply the extra staff to make up for the shortage of FEMA employees.

Now, the fact is, most of the contract employees with whom I worked were top-notch people who did a wonderful job. I had a number of them working for me during Katrina and by and large they were excellent employees.

But they could also be very expensive employees. In many cases, I learned that the contracting companies were billing FEMA for salaries significantly higher than the salaries of FEMA staff who were doing the same work. Interestingly, it seems that the contract employees themselves did not actually receive the higher pay ... that went to the contracting company in the form of "profit."

More annoyingly, it also became clear that some of these companies were gaming the system and using the disaster as an opportunity to obtain free training for their staff rather than as a concerted effort to relieve human misery.

For example, as I came on duty one night I was approached by a young man I'll call "Phil." Phil introduced himself, said he worked for the XXX company that was supporting FEMA in the disaster response and that he would be assigned to work for me. The only thing was, he had never done this type of work before, so could I please show him the ropes and explain what was needed?

Well, as any soldier can tell you, the middle of a battle is not when you want to start giving the troops their basic training, but Phil was there and I needed people, so I spent time with him showing him what was needed, going over his work with him and taking whatever time was needed to bring him up to speed. I then had him work alongside some of our more experienced people and within a few nights, Phil pretty much had the hang of it.

Then he disappeared.

Yep, one night I came in for our shift and Phil was gone, just when his work had started to be fully productive. Now that he had been trained, his company had shifted Phil to another work site. No problem - a young lady I'll call "Melinda" then walked up to me and introduced herself. Melinda said she worked for the XXX company that was supporting FEMA in the disaster response and that she would be assigned to work for me.

The only thing was, she had never done this type of work before, so could I please show her the ropes and explain what was needed?

It quickly became clear to me what an opportunity Hurricane Katrina was for some of the FEMA contracting companies. They would send their least-experienced staff to FEMA, supposedly to "assist" with the disaster work, but in reality to be trained by FEMA staff, who would be forced to take time away from their disaster relief work to do the training. Once the contract staff had been trained on one job, they could be transferred elsewhere and another novice brought in to "help."

So we continued to limp along at FEMA, short-staffed, burdened by poor leadership, confusing plans and, most of all, by the DHS. We did our best for the victims of Katrina, but it was not nearly good enough and it was not what they, or America, deserved from their government.

Epilog - After Katrina

After Hurricane Katrina, we were told that FEMA's problems would be remedied, but they only got worse. FEMA Director Mike Brown was replaced by David Paulison, a former fire chief who many hoped would revitalize the agency. However, during Paulison's tenure as head of FEMA, the agency continued its downhill slide:

- In 2006, when DHS decreed that hurricanes can be accurately predicted a full week in advance (they can't), Paulison went along with DHS plans to spend our time training on all the things we should do during the week before the hurricane hits ... a little like planning all the things you should do the week before you are hit by a car while crossing the street. One long-time FEMA

manager used computer modeling of previous hurricane tracks to disprove the logic of the "one-week" plan. That manager was immediately transferred to a different office.

·In 2007, when it became known that FEMA trailers housing Katrina disaster victims were giving off formaldehyde, an in-house FEMA newsletter cheerily featured an article entitled, "'Myth: FEMA Must Remove Formaldehyde from Travel Trailers.'" The article reassured us, "Formaldehyde is a common substance that is found in homes and buildings everywhere."

·Paulison's deputy was Harvey Johnson, a Coast Guard officer who became famous in 2007 for his "phony press conference" in which FEMA employees posed as reporters asking Johnson questions in what was purported to be a news conference. The incident made headlines nationwide, further damaging FEMA's reputation. Paulison issued a memo absolving Johnson of any wrongdoing, but the FEMA employee who leaked the photo that exposed the phony press conference was fired.

·And those embarrassing NSRs that had given advance warning of Katrina's approach? Deleted from the FEMA web site.

The message from these incidents was clear to all of us: FEMA's mission was first and foremost PR; "emergency management" was a distant second, if that. Any attempts to push back and actually fix the agency's problems would either be ignored or punished.

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard, which was rightly praised for the heroism of its pilots and its rescue crews during the Katrina operations, was told to send some of its officers over to FEMA to straighten things out. Fine, except the Coast Guard didn't send their best officers to FEMA: while a few of the officers they sent seemed well-qualified, in many cases, the Coast Guard simply cleaned house and sent us their failures, officers who had been passed over for promotion or who had other problems. It was not such a great deal for FEMA.

With the influx of Coast Guard officers, along with uniformed officers from various branches of the military, experienced disaster managers at FEMA found themselves pushed into the background, and many of them simply left the agency in disgust. As one long-time FEMA executive remarked to me, "If

you have disaster experience at FEMA, it's the kiss of death for your career." In January, 2008, I finally called it quits and retired from FEMA after more than 28 years with the agency.

The following November, Barack Obama was elected president and in May 2009, Craig Fugate was appointed as the new FEMA administrator. Fugate, the former head of the Florida Division of Emergency Management, is an outgoing and down-to-earth individual who has gotten well-deserved high marks for his knowledge and experience with disasters.

However, in the view of some, he has not moved quickly enough in turning the agency around. While some experienced disaster managers have indeed been brought into the agency, Fugate's management team still appears to be weighed down by less-than-stellar executives left over from the Bush administration, and Fugate himself has at times seemed reluctant to address FEMA's internal problems head-on. Female staff at several FEMA offices have complained of sexual harassment and even of workplace violence, but remedies to these complaints seem to come slowly, if at all. The executives who fired the whistleblower after the 2007 phony press conference are still in their jobs. The embarrassing NSRs from Hurricane Katrina have still not been restored to the FEMA web site. Other problems continue to fester beneath the surface.

One senior FEMA staff member summed up the situation bluntly to me: "The Bush people did the crimes; the Obama people covered them up."

Meanwhile, outside visitors trying to penetrate FEMA's shell often come away complaining about rude treatment and the lack of knowledgeable FEMA staff. One experienced disaster manager went so far as to tell me, "Craig Fugate and [Deputy Administrator] Rick Serino are great, but from there on down the system is rotten."

Overall, what I have heard so far from many of my former FEMA colleagues has been along the lines of, well, it seems to be getting better ... but pretty slowly.

Despite these shortcomings, I still have hopes for FEMA. Fugate seems sincere and knowledgeable and if he does not have the close-to-the-president kind of power that Witt had, I nonetheless believe he is clearly capable of leading the agency. And many FEMA staff, new and old alike, are well-qualified people who are motivated by a desire to help protect America from the impacts of disasters.

Can FEMA, now a component of Homeland Security, overcome its recent history and its continuing impediments and once again act as effectively as it did as an independent agency under the Clinton administration? Time will tell ... as will FEMA's response to the next major emergency or disaster.

I wish my former colleagues at FEMA the best.

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