



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Hurricane Katrina: Recommendations for Reform”
March 8, 2006

Today, the Committee holds its 21st hearing on Hurricane Katrina. As this is our final hearing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Committee colleagues, particularly the ranking member Senator Lieberman, for their outstanding commitment to a matter of such importance to our nation. I also would like to express my deep appreciation to Committee staff for their extraordinary efforts during this exhaustive investigation.

In addition to the 74 witnesses who have testified at the hearings to date, our staff has conducted more than 300 interviews and reviewed some 820,000 pages of documents. At our first hearing on Katrina, now nearly six months ago, I stated that it was the Committee’s intent to conduct a thorough, deliberate, and fair review of the preparation for and response to this disaster at all levels of government. We have done that.

I also pledged that we would ask the hard questions in order to learn why local, state, and federal authorities did not work together as one cohesive and effective unit. A structure crafted with great investments of time, energy, and money after the attacks of 9/11 failed its first major test. We now have a far better understanding of why the system failed the people of the Gulf Region.

The excuse we have heard from some government officials throughout this investigation, that Katrina was an unforeseeable ultra-catastrophe, has not only been demonstrated to have been mistaken, but also misses the point that we need to be ready for the worst that nature or evil men can throw at us. Powerful though it was, the most extraordinary thing about Katrina was our lack of preparedness for a disaster so long predicted.

Our 20 hearings to date have taken us from the front lines of search and rescue to the top of the Department of Homeland Security. They have provided us with a tremendous body of knowledge about the emergency preparation and response tactics that worked, and those that did not.

Now it is time to turn this tactical knowledge into a new strategy. Thus, today we turn our attention to the recommendations for reform.

This is not the first time the devastation of a natural disaster brought about demands for a better, more coordinated government response. In fact, this process truly began after a series of natural disasters in the 1960s and into the 1970s. One of those disasters was Hurricane Betsy, which hit New Orleans in 1965. The similarities with Katrina are striking: levees overtopped and breached, severe flooding, communities destroyed, thousands rescued from rooftops by helicopters, thousands more by boat, and too many lives lost.

In a report published in 1993, a year after Hurricane Andrew hit Florida, the GAO wrote that, and I quote, “the response to Hurricane Andrew raised doubts about whether FEMA is capable of responding to catastrophic disasters and whether it had learned any lessons from its responses to Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta earthquake.” One could simply substitute Katrina for Andrew and any major disaster during the last decade for Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta earthquake in that conclusion and, unfortunately, it would still be valid today.

Indeed, during the last half-century, the federal government has experimented with eight different emergency management structures, from the Housing and Home Finance Administration of the 1950s to the latest incarnation of FEMA within the Department of Homeland Security. Katrina revealed that this kaleidoscope of reorganizations has not improved our disaster management capability during these critical years.

Our purpose and our obligation now is to move forward to create a structure that brings immediate improvement and that guarantees continual progress. This will not be done by simply renaming agencies or drawing new organizational charts. We are not here to rearrange the deck chairs on a ship that, while perhaps not sinking, certainly is adrift.

This new structure must be based on a clear understanding of the roles and capabilities of all emergency management agencies. It must establish a strong chain of command that encourages, empowers, and trusts front-line decision-making. It must replace ponderous, rigid bureaucracy with discipline, agility, cooperation, and collaboration. It must build a stronger partnership among all levels of government with the responsibilities of each partner clearly defined, and it must hold them accountable when those responsibilities are not met.

We know our goal. I look forward to the views our witnesses will offer today on how to achieve it. To that end, it is essential that we hear their views on such questions as:

How do we design a comprehensive emergency management structure that is focused on all-hazards mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery?

What role should the federal government play in ensuring that state and local governments are prepared to respond to disasters?

What is the best use of the federal government's resources when a disaster strikes?

What is the appropriate role for the Department of Defense in a domestic disaster?

What changes might be needed to the Stafford Act so that there are no statutory impediments to carrying out the preparedness and response functions, so that federal actions can start well before state and local resources are overwhelmed?

What will be required to make the FEMA Director's position one that will be sought by experienced professional emergency managers?

And, central to the Committee's oversight responsibilities, what changes are needed so that DHS will become more effective in all stages of emergency management – prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery?

I am especially pleased to welcome our distinguished colleague, Senator Mikulski, to the Committee. Senator Mikulski is a dedicated advocate for reform of our emergency response system. Our other witnesses today also provide a wide range of expertise and experience that will help us craft a national emergency management system that will better serve the American people during disasters, whether acts of nature or terrorist attacks.

The hearings that the Committee has conducted form a solid foundation for the work that lies ahead. As we proceed, we would do well not just to bear in mind what we have heard in this room, but also to take to heart what many of us have seen in the ruins of the Gulf Coast of Mississippi or in the devastated neighborhoods of New Orleans. The suffering in those places is great, but the determination of the people there to rebuild is even greater. Our determination to build a truly effective national emergency management system must be just as strong.

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