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Katrina Report Spreads Blame

Homeland Security, Chertoff Singled Out

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Hurricane Katrina exposed the U.S. government's failure to learn the lessons of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as leaders from President Bush down disregarded ample warnings of the threat to New Orleans and did not execute emergency plans or share information that would have saved lives, according to a blistering report by House investigators.

A draft of the report, to be released publicly Wednesday, includes 90 findings of failures at all levels of government, according to a senior investigation staffer who requested anonymity because the document is not final. Titled "A Failure of Initiative," it is one of three separate reviews by the House, Senate and White House that will in coming weeks dissect the response to the nation's costliest natural disaster.

The 600-plus-page report lays primary fault with the passive reaction and misjudgments of top Bush aides, singling out Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, the Homeland Security Operations Center and the White House Homeland Security Council, according to a 60-page summary of the document obtained by The Washington Post. Regarding Bush, the report found that "earlier presidential involvement could have speeded the response" because he alone could have cut through all bureaucratic resistance.

The report, produced by an 11-member House select committee of Republicans chaired by Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), proposes few specific changes. But it is an unusual compendium of criticism by the House GOP, which generally has not been aggressive in its oversight of the administration.

The report portrays Chertoff, who took the helm of the department six months before the storm, as detached from events. It contends he switched on the government's emergency response systems "late, ineffectively or not at all," delaying the flow of federal troops and materiel by as much as three days.

The White House did not fully engage the president or "substantiate, analyze and act on the information at its disposal," failing to confirm the collapse of New Orleans's levee system on Aug. 29, the day of Katrina's landfall, which led to catastrophic flooding of the city of 500,000 people.

On the ground, Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael D. Brown, who has since resigned, FEMA field commanders and the U.S. military's commanding general set up rival chains of command. The Coast Guard, which alone rescued nearly half of 75,000 people stranded in New Orleans, flew nine helicopters and two airplanes over the city that first day, but eyewitness reconnaissance did not reach official Washington before midnight.

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At the same time, weaknesses identified by Sept. 11 investigators -- poor communications among first responders, a shortage of qualified emergency personnel and lack of training and funding -- doomed a response confronted by overwhelming demands for help.

"If 9/11 was a failure of imagination then Katrina was a failure of initiative. It was a failure of leadership," the report's preface states. "In this instance, blinding lack of situational awareness and disjointed decision making needlessly compounded and prolonged Katrina's horror."

Chertoff spokesman Russ Knocke said, "every ounce of authority" and "100 percent of everything that could be pre-staged was pre-staged" by the federal government before landfall once the president signed emergency disaster declarations on Aug. 27. Brown had "all authority" to make decisions and requests, and his "willful insubordination . . . was a significant problem" for Chertoff, Knocke said.

White House spokesman Trent Duffy said Bush had full confidence in his homeland security team, both appointed and career. "The president was involved from beginning to end," implementing emergency powers before the storm and taking responsibility afterward, Duffy said.

Duffy objected to a leaked draft of an unpublished report, and said the White House is completing its own study. "The president is less interested in yesterday, and more interested with today and tomorrow," he said, "so that we can be better prepared for next time."

The report puts the government response in a larger context and offers a few new details. In months of hearings, House and Senate investigative committees have already revealed the lack of White House awareness of events on the ground, political infighting between federal and state leaders, delays in ordering evacuations and the meltdown of FEMA operations.

The review, launched Sept. 15, suggests that federal funding be used to update state evacuation studies. It proposes making commercial airliners available in an emergency and creating a database to provide a national clearinghouse of shelter data. It also suggests naming a professional disaster adviser to the president, akin to the military's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Democrats, whose leaders considered the investigation a partisan whitewash and boycotted it, called for Chertoff's removal. Reps. Charlie Melancon (D-La.) and William J. Jefferson (D-La.), who informally participated in the inquiry, renewed calls for an independent commission styled after the one that investigated the Sept. 11 attacks, saying that the investigation, while comprehensive, was rushed, failed to compel the White House to turn over documents and held no administration officials accountable.

House investigators acknowledge that after reviewing nine hearings, scores of interviews and 500,000 pages of documents, they "will never know" what would have happened had federal, Louisiana and New Orleans officials activated plans and called on the military before the storm, and evacuated the city sooner than Aug. 28. However, the committee found U.S. disaster preparedness -- individual, corporate, philanthropic and governmental -- remains dangerously inadequate.

"All the little pigs built houses of straw," it wrote. "Katrina was a national failure, an abdication of the most solemn obligation to provide for the common welfare."

The report reconstructs a chronology of events over a three-week span from Aug. 22 to Sept. 12. It focuses primarily on failures by Chertoff and the rest of the administration to execute a year-old National Response Plan and set up a related command structure, designed to marshal resources in the critical first 72 hours after a catastrophe.

The report said the single biggest federal failure was not anticipating the consequences of the storm.

Disaster planners had rated the flooding of New Orleans as the nation's most feared scenario, testing it under a catastrophic disaster preparedness program in 2004.

About 56 hours before Katrina made landfall, the National Weather Service and National Hurricane Center cited an "extremely high probability" that New Orleans would be flooded and tens of thousands of residents killed.

Given those warnings, the report notes Bush's televised statement on Sept. 1 that "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees," and concludes: "Comments such as those . . . do not appear to be consistent with the advice and counsel one would expect to have been provided by a senior disaster professional."

As the president's principal disaster adviser, Chertoff poorly executed many decisions, including declaring Katrina an "incident of national significance" -- the highest designation under the national emergency response plan and convening an interagency board of experienced strategic advisers on Aug. 30 instead of Aug. 27; designating an untrained Brown to take charge of the disaster; and failing to invoke a federal plan that would have pushed federal help to overwhelmed state and local officials rather than waiting for them to request it.

The report said Chertoff was "confused" about Brown's role and authority, and that it was unclear why he chose him, given his lack of skills and his hostility to FEMA's downgrading under new plans.

After failing to foresee the need to muster buses, boats and aircraft, the next critical federal mistake was failure to confirm catastrophic levee breaches, the report asserts.

Despite a FEMA official's eyewitness accounts of breaches starting at 7 p.m. on Aug. 29, the president's Homeland Security Council, led by homeland security adviser Frances Fragos Townsend and her deputy, Ken Rapuano, did not consider them confirmed until 11 hours later, on Aug. 30.

The first federal order to evacuate New Orleans was not issued until 1:30 a.m. Aug. 31, and came only after FEMA's ground commander in New Orleans, Phil Parr, put out a call for buses after finding water lapping at the approaches to the Superdome, where about 12,000 victims were camped.

The council's "failure to resolve conflicts in information and the 'fog of war,' not a lack of information, caused confusion," the House panel wrote. It added that the crisis showed the government remains "woefully incapable" of managing information, much as it was before the 2001 attacks.

The summary obtained by The Post generally praises pre-storm evacuations by Gulf Coast leaders, but it criticizes preparations and decisions by Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D) and New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin (D), who knew that 100,000 city residents had no cars and relied on public transit. The city's failure to complete its mandatory evacuation, ordered Aug. 28, led to hundreds of deaths, the report said.

Neighboring Plaquemines Parish, by contrast, issued its order Aug. 27, helping to hold the number of storm deaths there at three. Nursing homes outside New Orleans were able to find special transportation for patients, while at least one in the city could not find bus drivers by the time people were told to leave.

The investigation also condemned "hyped media coverage of violence and lawlessness, legitimized by New Orleans authorities," for increasing security burdens, scaring away rescuers and heightening tension in the city.

It faulted Nagin for repeating, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, rumors of armed gangs committing

rapes and murder in an "almost animalistic state." The report said few cases of gunshots or violence were confirmed, although it acknowledged that few police were able to investigate and victims may have had little incentive to report crime.

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