

White House stonewalls official Hurricane Katrina inquiry

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28 January 2006

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At his press conference Thursday, Bush defended the practice. “If people give me advice and they’re forced to disclose that advice, it means the next time an issue comes up, I might not be able to get unvarnished advice from my advisors.” He also claimed his administration had been “fully cooperative” with the House and Senate committees.

At the committee hearing Tuesday, witness presentations focused on the extent of emergency preparedness in the months and years before Katrina, which left at least 1,100 dead, displaced more than a million area residents, and caused hundreds of billions of dollars in damage.

But the investigation, conducted by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, has been thwarted by the White House from obtaining communications logs, and even dates and times of meetings and phone calls regarding Katrina emergency response efforts.

White House spokesperson Trent Duffy told reporters Tuesday that the administration had declined to provide testimony from Andrew Card, the White House chief of staff; Card’s deputy, Joe Hagin; and domestic security adviser Frances Townsend. Townsend’s deputy, Ken Rapuano, has given informal, non-public briefings to the committee, but has also effectively been placed under a presidential gag order. In addition, Duffy said that the administration has refused to provide staff member correspondence, including e-mails regarding the hurricane.

Joseph Lieberman (Democrat—Connecticut), the highest-ranking senator on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, accused the White House on Tuesday of enacting a “gag order” to hinder the committee’s work. “The problems begin at the White House, where there has been a near total lack of cooperation that has made it impossible, in my opinion, for us to do the thorough investigation we have a responsibility to do.”

According to Lieberman, attorneys advised former Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) head Michael Brown during a closed-door session not to respond to questions on “whether he spoke to the president or the vice president, or comment on the substance of conversations” he had with White House officials during the response operation. Brown did acknowledge that he had exchanged e-mails and phone calls repeatedly with Bush, Chief of Staff Card and Card’s deputy during the two days before Katrina made landfall. When asked

about the types of requests he made in preparation, Brown stated, “I’m being advised by counsel that I can’t discuss with you my conversations with the president’s chief of staff and the president.”

Republican Senator Susan Collins, also on the committee, complained of “completely inappropriate” reticence on the part of witnesses who “have told us when we begin to ask about any communications with the White House” that they had been advised not to answer, citing executive privilege.

The stonewalling by the White House on the Katrina investigation is of a piece with its now-standard practice of cloaking the activities of the administration and its officials in secrecy, claiming all-encompassing powers for the presidency and no accountability to Congress or the American public.

The White House shrugged off the criticisms and insisted it was cooperating in its own way, on its own terms. “There are numerous administration officials that have gone before the committee and testified,” spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters. “We’ve had specialized briefings by the national security adviser for the committees. And we will continue to work with committees in a cooperative way to make sure they have the information they need to do their job.” He added disingenuously, “I know there is always some separation of powers issues involved in some of these matters, but we’re committed to working in a cooperative way.” Meanwhile, on Tuesday, the *Washington Post* reported that it had obtained two documents that suggested that the White House was not being forthcoming with what officials knew before Katrina hit. The Department of Homeland Security’s National Infrastructure Simulation and Analysis Center (NISAC) and FEMA provided the White House with several sobering assessments of the situation shortly before Katrina’s landfall.

On August 29, a few hours before impact, a 41-page document was sent as an e-mail from NISAC to the White House “situation room,” where national emergencies are managed. According to the *Post*, the assessment included a warning that a storm of comparable size would “likely lead to severe flooding and/or levee breaching,” that “could leave the New Orleans metro area submerged for weeks or months.”

Specifically, the levees along Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans were considered to be vulnerable to failure. The document also included the projection that Katrina “could leave the New Orleans metro area submerged for weeks and months.” NISAC estimated losses in the tens of billions of dollars, long-term damage to

utilities, and compounded difficulties in emergency response because of power and telecommunications outages.

A separate document, sent the night after landfall, was cited by the *New York Times* as warning the White House of a quarter-mile-long levee breach near the 17th Street Canal, and that “an estimated 2/3 to 75 percent of the city is underwater.” This urgent assessment resulted in no immediate action from the Bush administration.

The document acquired by the *Post* included a slide presentation on the impending catastrophe that was presented to the administration on the morning of August 27. An accompanying document compared Katrina, then a Category 3 building to Category 4, to a computer simulation called Hurricane Pam. The simulation was built by NISAC for the Catastrophic Planning Initiative, a FEMA project begun in 2003, and was considered to be the most accurate predictive computer model yet developed. The simulated Hurricane Pam was a slow-moving Category 3 storm that moved in over New Orleans from the southeast. It carried winds of 120 miles per hour and 20 inches of rain and produced a storm surge that breached levees in southern Louisiana. Projected consequences included a death toll as high as 60,000, the submersion of the city in 10 to 20 feet of water, 234,000 collapsed buildings, 786,000 residents without power, and the forced evacuation of more than a million residents.

While the death toll from Katrina was fortunately much lower than projected, the simulation was otherwise correct. Katrina—a slow-moving Category 3 hurricane by the time it came ashore—brought 20 inches of rain, 20 feet of water in low-lying neighborhoods, 250,000 destroyed homes, 881,400 residents without power, and the displacement of more than a million. The accuracy of the model and its eerie resemblance to Katrina points to negligence on the part of the Bush administration in the days leading up to the Katrina disaster, as well as a gross lack of preparedness on the part of federal agencies for years beforehand.

Together, these documents stand as a concrete repudiation of statements made by top officials in the immediate aftermath, who maintained that widespread death and destruction were unforeseen. On September 1, as the disaster was compounding in toxic flood waters, President Bush told ABC’s “Good Morning America” news show, “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees.”

Two days later, as FEMA and federal troops focused on containment of the city’s survivors rather than evacuation, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told reporters that the collapse of the levees was “breathtaking in its surprise.” He characterized Katrina as “That ‘perfect storm’ of a combination of catastrophes exceeded the foresight of the planners, and maybe anybody’s foresight....”

In comments in the early days of the disaster, Bush made clear that the Homeland Security Department, which includes FEMA, intended to move in only after the storm had run its course, and that residents of New Orleans unable to evacuate needed to fend for themselves.

Moreover, in the emergency declaration Bush signed in response to a request from Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, FEMA aid and support was specifically authorized for 39 southern Louisiana

parishes, but excluded from two of the most vulnerable to flooding, Orleans Parish (the city of New Orleans) and Jefferson Parish. On August 29, former FEMA Director Michael Brown urged local fire and rescue personnel arriving in the area not to attempt to help those parishes not listed as having requested assistance.

These two low-lying, working class parishes suffered severe damage and loss of life when the levees failed. The response from the federal government in the subsequent days augmented the crisis. Jefferson Parish president Aaron Broussard, describing the situation on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on September 4, said that FEMA was cutting off aid and communications. “We had Wal-Mart deliver three trucks of water. FEMA turned them back,” he said.

“They said we didn’t need them. This was a week ago. FEMA, we had 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel on a Coast Guard vessel docked in my parish. When we got there with our trucks, FEMA says don’t give you the fuel,” Broussard said, breaking down. “Yesterday—yesterday—FEMA comes in and cuts all of our emergency communication lines. They cut them without notice. Our sheriff, Harry Lee, goes back in, he reconnects the line. He posts armed guards and said no one is getting near these lines.”

Hurricane Katrina was the most costly disaster in US history, causing at least \$100 billion in damage. But five months after the evacuation, the federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program announced the distribution of a mere \$11.5 billion in housing aid, spread among five states hit by both Katrina and Rita, which caused an additional \$8 billion in damage. On Wednesday, HUD pledged a paltry \$74.5 million to Texas to provide public housing for the quarter of the million residents still displaced.

Louisiana, which requested \$30 billion in HUD funds, was allocated only \$6.2 billion. Poor residents have been effectively locked out of the reconstruction, while corporate interests swallow up the city. Working class neighborhoods with disproportionate levels of poverty and rental housing were hardest hit, and have been abandoned by local, state, and federal governments in all but lip service. Many of these homeowners still don’t know if they will be allowed to rebuild in their neighborhoods, or whether they will receive compensation for their lost property.

On Wednesday, the White House said it would oppose a proposal sponsored by Rep. Richard Baker, a Louisiana Republican, to create a federal agency to buy homes destroyed by the recent Gulf Coast hurricanes. The plan, already approved by a House committee, would create a corporation funded by government-backed bonds to take over destroyed properties at the request of homeowners.

Donald Power, a former bank regulator and the president’s coordinator for Gulf Coast rebuilding, commented, “I think we would all be served better if the government didn’t get into the real estate business and leave that to the private sector.”



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