

Testimony at Senate hearing

Former FEMA head says White House had early knowledge of Katrina's devastation

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Michael Brown, the former head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), testified Friday that within hours of Hurricane Katrina's landfall on New Orleans, White House officials were informed of the catastrophic damage caused by the storm. Brown's testimony, backed up by a series of documents reported in the media this week, makes clear that the Bush administration knew of a breach in the levee system protecting New Orleans much earlier than it has acknowledged.

Testifying before the Senate Homeland Security Committee, Brown said that he had been in repeated contact with White House officials on August 29, including Deputy Chief of Staff Joseph Hagin, who was with President Bush at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, where the president was vacationing when the storm hit.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall just after 6 a.m. on August 29, and by 11 a.m. FEMA officials were reporting that a major levee had breached, leading to massive flooding. Brown called White House claims that the extent of the damage was not known until August 30 "just baloney."

No serious federal action was taken for days after Katrina struck, compounding the devastation, human misery and death caused by the hurricane. Brown was forced to resign in the aftermath of the hurricane, after being singled out by the media and selected by Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to serve as the administration's fall guy for the general incompetence and negligence that characterized the government's response to the disaster.

Brown's testimony came in the face of continuing stonewalling by the Bush administration, which has refused to release to Congress communications by White House aides before and after the hurricane hit. The administration has also refused to allow these aides to testify before the Senate committee, citing "executive privilege."

Previously, Brown had declined to discuss details of his conversations with the White House on August 29, under the advice of his lawyers and in the face of pressure from the Bush administration. The White House apparently hoped he would continue this policy. In a letter to Brown on February 9, White House Counsel Harriet Miers requested that Brown "observe his past practices with respect to those communications." However, the Bush administration did not seek to invoke executive privilege in relation to Brown's Senate testimony, which would have been

legally dubious since Brown is now a private citizen and not subject to administration discipline.

This put the committee's Republican chairperson, Senator Susan Collins of Maine, in a difficult position. She said at the start of the hearing Friday that if the White House had invoked executive privilege, she would have been inclined to accept it, but since it had not, there were no grounds for withholding details during Brown's testimony. He was therefore instructed to answer all questions regarding the specifics of his communications with the White House.

Brown himself appeared eager to answer these questions, evidently angered at having been abandoned and "thrown to the wolves" by his former patrons in the White House.

In his testimony, Brown said that as early as 10 a.m. on August 29—four hours after the hurricane hit ground—he first learned that the levees surrounding New Orleans had been breached, and that this had caused severe flooding in parts of the city. This information came from Marty Bahamonde, a public affairs officer for FEMA and the only FEMA official in New Orleans at the time.

Brown told the Senate committee that he "put a call in and spoke to—I believe it was Deputy Chief of Staff Hagin—on at least two occasions on that day to inform him of what was going on." He said he may also have spoken to White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card.

Since Hagin was with Bush in Texas at the time, talking to Hagin was "like speaking to the President," Brown said. "I think I told [Hagin] that we were realizing our worst nightmare, that everything we had planned about, worried about, that FEMA, frankly, had worried about for 10 years, was coming true," he testified.

Brown said he e-mailed Card on the 29th and told him that "this was the big one" that had been feared. He also said he may have spoken briefly to Bush himself on the evening of the 29th, but could not recall for certain.

Both Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff continue to claim that they were not informed of the levee breaches and large-scale flooding until August 30.

During the hearing, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the ranking Democrat on the Homeland Security Committee, reported that at 11:13 a.m. on August 29 the White House Homeland Security Council produced a report stating: "Flooding is significant

throughout the region, and a levee in New Orleans has reportedly been breached, sending six to eight feet of water throughout the 9th Ward area of the city.” The report said residents had been forced to climb up to their attics and onto the roofs of their houses.

By the evening of the 29th, top administration officials were undeniably aware of concrete evidence that the levee had breached. In earlier testimony before Collins and Lieberman, Bahamonde said that around 7 p.m. he called Brown personally to report his findings from two helicopter fly-overs of the devastated city. According to Bahamonde, Brown responded with the statement, “Thank you, I am now going to call the White House.”

An e-mail sent to Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff’s chief of staff, John Wood, at 9:27 p.m. reported: “The first (unconfirmed) reports they are getting from aerial surveys in New Orleans are far more serious than media reports are currently reflecting.” The report added that there was “extensive flooding.”

At 10:30 p.m., the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued its own report stating that there was a breach in the levee and that “some houses were seen with water to the first floor and others completely underwater.” The report noted: “Only one of the main pumps is reported to still be working but cannot keep up with the demand and its longevity is doubtful.” This report got to the White House by midnight.

And yet, on the morning of August 30, 24 hours after the first reports of a levee breach and massive flooding, Bush made the statement that New Orleans had “dodged the bullet” and had come off without serious damage. Chertoff flew off that day to attend a briefing on avian flu.

On September 1, Bush said on ABC’s “Good Morning America: “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees.” And on September 4, Chertoff made the claim on CBS’s “Face the Nation” that “the hurricane started to depart the area on Monday [August 29], and then on Tuesday morning the levee broke and the water started to flood into New Orleans.”

Not only was the administration informed early of the levee breach, it was widely known what such a breach would entail. A FEMA National Situation Report issued the day before Katrina hit noted that “a direct hit could wind up submerging the city in several feet of water,” posing a serious threat to “at least 100,000 people in the city [who] lack the transportation to get out of town.”

Highlighted by these documents and Brown’s testimony are two basic traits of not only the Bush administration, but the entire American ruling elite: a complete indifference to the lives of masses of ordinary people, and the systematic and brazen use of lies and cover-ups to hide the facts and conceal their own culpability.

The administration continues to claim that there were “conflicting reports” about the extent of damage to the levees. White House spokesman Scott McClellan said on Friday, “Some were saying it was overtopping, some were saying it was breached.”

In fact, all those directly involved were reporting a breached levee on Monday, August 29—in particular, FEMA, the DHS and the Army Corps of Engineers. Moreover, for several days, the administration did virtually nothing to save lives or rescue those who were stranded in the flooded city, even after the extent of the

damage was clear to the entire world.

Bush himself was unconcerned about what was going on in New Orleans and was not even following news reports as he vacationed in Texas. In spite of the dire warnings as the hurricane approached, no preparations were made at a federal level to respond quickly or organize an evacuation of those who were unable to escape. As popular outrage at governmental indifference developed in the wake of the hurricane, the administration resorted to lies.

Brown was part of this general indifference. While he is now seeking to spread responsibility to other government officials, he showed no sense of urgency in the aftermath of the hurricane. Brown was a long-time friend and supporter of Bush who had no experience in handling natural disasters at the time of his appointment.

The government’s lack of response to Hurricane Katrina reflects the basic class character of American society. The entire government is oriented toward enriching a tiny section of the population, with such questions as the health and well being of ordinary people barely registering as a concern. The focus on “homeland security” and the “war against terrorism” has been little more than a ruse to justify war and anti-democratic measures. The government has made no preparations for dealing with a real disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina.

As for those who have been devastated by the hurricane, there is no more concern for them now than when the hurricane hit. In his State of the Union address at the end of January, Bush did not so much as mention Katrina or New Orleans. This was only five months after the worst natural disaster in US history, in which a major US city was virtually destroyed.

This week, the government is finally succeeding in kicking all Katrina evacuees out of the hotels where they have been staying with FEMA assistance. Some of these will be made homeless, while others will be forced for an indefinite period to live in trailer camps. The plans for rebuilding New Orleans do not include the reconstruction of the homes of many of the working class residents whose property was most severely damaged.

Whatever comes out of the Senate hearings, there will be no real accountability from the administration or restitution for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The White House will rely once again on the absence of any serious opposition from the Democratic Party to its policies.



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