



How did intergovernmental relations fail in the USA after Hurricane Katrina?

BY DEIL S. WRIGHT

On August 29, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and Michael Brown, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), stood side-by-side at a press conference shortly after Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi. They praised and complimented each other for intergovernmental co-operation in responding to the massive storm.

Twenty-four hours later, most of New Orleans was flooded with three to four metres of water and 80 per cent of the city's population had evacuated. There were 100,000 people without transportation left in the city, and thousands — nearly all African-Americans — were in the city's Convention Center and Superdome, and looting and violence had started.

From harmony to discord

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Governor Blanco were now criticizing, even cursing, not only FEMA but the Department of Homeland Security and President Bush. They blasted the delays and disorganization of FEMA, Homeland Security and others for failure to aid beleaguered citizens and state/local personnel in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

What explains this sudden reversal in intergovernmental relations? Why the dramatic turnabout from commendations to condemnations in the span of one day? The exploding scope of the disaster pushed citizens' and officials' frayed nerves beyond limits. But a host of other factors — political, social, racial, economic, administrative and especially intergovernmental — sent intergovernmental relations on the Gulf Coast into a downward spiral of recriminations and helped turn a disaster into a catastrophe.

The scale of the catastrophe

To the one million displaced and dispersed Gulf Coast residents, as well as to millions of others aiding recovery efforts, Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophe. Catastrophes reveal the worst and best of human nature. Some people loot while others lend support, and both of these took place in New Orleans. Some lean toward despair fostering anarchy while others respond to challenges with creativity. In the midst of this, the mayor's core group of 15 people had to relocate to a Hyatt Hotel and scavenge makeshift

communications systems after their land lines, cell phones, and police radios all failed. Hurricane Katrina unleashed a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions.

How did local, state and national officials respond? In the nation's capital, on Thursday, September 1, 2005, FEMA Director Brown claimed to be unaware of TV broadcasts showing thousands massed in the Convention Center. While Houston, Texas, took half of the evacuees, cities and states all across the nation offered to host evacuees. More than 500 miles northward, Iowa, for example, set up a shelter for 1,000 persons. The response from different levels of government was mixed. Their responses (and non-responses) turned a manageable disaster into a catastrophe.

Intergovernmental relations in the USA

It is premature to pass final judgment on the leaders of local, state and national agencies. A search for "guilty" officials is itself a highly contentious issue. We cannot capture the full array of events, actions and communications that occurred — or lapsed — among officials in positions of authority before, during and after Katrina. We gain a better understanding, however, of the Gulf Shore's catastrophe by stating a fundamental proposition of how intergovernmental relations work in America. These relations produce complexities and autonomy that tilt the American system of governance toward devolution, deference and delay. In emergencies, local officials are first responders and state actors are secondary, while national agencies provide "last resort" resources. Public officials favour caution over action. Politicians and career administrators live with risk and uncertainly rather than actively searching for certainty.

There are more than 87,000 units of local governments in the USA plus 50 state governments and the national government. Virtually all have significant powers to tax and spend almost as they wish. More importantly, there are nearly 500,000 popularly elected local and state officials possessing authority to advocate on behalf of "their citizens". Is it any wonder that the American intergovernmental relations are often described as operating under "mild chaos"? The tragedy of the Katrina catastrophe is that political will and managerial skill failed to overcome the bias that intergovernmental relations have toward chaos.



Buses left unused during New Orleans evacuations, after miscommunication between State Government and FEMA.

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FEMA was intended to be a disaster-response arrangement that would bypass the “mild chaos” tendency of American intergovernmental relations. But that did not happen. Disaster-response arrangements require unified authority or tight co-ordination. Such tight co-ordination can provide energetic, focussed, timely action, and a marshalling of all available resources for the job at hand. This was not the response that was made to Katrina. Was it a flaw in the structures or failure of individual politicians and civil servants that caused this breakdown?

With important exceptions, elected officials at all levels let their “public human nature” run its course of belated and modest responses. But a federal system poses an extra risk. In a book on homeland security and American politics, Donald Kettl observes that “the richly textured system of federalism contains powerful incentives for fragmentation and in the absence of an overpowering force to bridge the cracks in the intergovernmental system those cracks . . . [could] undermine the nation’s emergency preparedness.” The breaks in the levies around New Orleans were literal as well as figurative “cracks” in intergovernmental relations.

Breakdowns on the path to catastrophe

Why did the virtual cracks in American intergovernmental relations go unrepaired in the spiral from a clear hurricane threat to the impending disaster and resulting catastrophe? The fundamental features and numerous nuances of relations among governments in the USA are only the necessary conditions, not the sufficient causes of the Gulf Coast chaos.

Most of the time, governments co-operate haltingly but effectively in the provision of public goods and services to nearly 300 million American “customers”. Why the faulty and fatal breakdown with Katrina?

In the absence of an official report similar to the *9/11 Commission Report*, definitive causes are tentative and speculative. And like the 9/11 Commission itself, creating an investigative entity is controversial. It is possible, however, to draw on the 9/11 Commission’s analysis to identify the leading factors contributing to the Gulf Coast chaos and catastrophe. The Commission identified these as

1. lack of imagination
2. misplaced policy priorities
3. inadequate capacity
4. ineffective management

A PhD thesis could be written about each of these topics. We are restricted to one or two explanatory sentences.

Imagination involves the likelihood and the gravity of the threat in terms of security. Prior intense hurricanes and floods had occurred and, despite the Katrina warning, too many officials in too many formal positions paid too little attention to imagining that chaos and catastrophe could ensue.

Policy can be represented by one example — FEMA. FEMA was absorbed in the Department of Homeland Security and downgraded in status and resources; it operated in the policy shadows of an anti-terrorism policy emphasis. Its leader lacked any semblance of disaster management experience, and has recently resigned. Were there also, as most African-Americans and a number of other critics believe, misguided policy priorities because of racial and economic factors? Did the fact that most of the remaining residents trapped in the

city were poor and African-American contribute to the slow evacuation and rescue efforts?

Capacity, in a few words, reflects the ability to fulfill a mission. The 9/11 Commission’s assertions about capacity apply equally well to Katrina and its consequences. “Government agencies . . . are too often passive, accepting what are viewed as givens, including efforts to identify and fix glaring vulnerabilities and dangerous threats that would be too costly, too controversial, and too disruptive.” Organizational capacity was woefully short among most if not all of the 75 to 100 local, state, and national agencies tasked with responding to Katrina along the gulf Coast.

Management covers a wide swath that includes but transcends effective communication within and across governmental jurisdictions. Agencies operating in the American intergovernmental system are much like medical specialists, each doing diagnoses, ordering tests and issuing prescriptions. Conspicuously absent from the myriad of specialists is the attending physician, whose primary task is to see that the specialists work as a team to assure the health of the patient. Effective intergovernmental relations in the USA depend on the presence of many “attending physicians”. In the case of the Katrina catastrophe, they were in short or non-existent supply.

Hindsight and foresight

The Katrina catastrophe generated economic costs in the billions of dollars. Already a target figure of \$200 billion has been set as the national

reconstruction contribution alone, plus billions of additional state and local funds. A realistic account has to add to that the loss of between 1,000 and 2,000 lives, rising consumer gas and oil costs and reduced economic growth of between one-half to one per cent. Not even a comprehensive national commission study is likely to compute accurately the full costs and consequences of Katrina’s Gulf Coast visit.

One fact does seem clear, however. The Katrina drama was played out on a stage defined by the complexities and mild chaos of intergovernmental relations. Preventing another Katrina-like natural or terrorist catastrophe will require public leaders with political wills and experienced administrators with management skills — and the structures and the organization to translate this will and these skills into action. . Those qualities are required to span the jurisdictional boundaries confronting every official operating in American intergovernmental relations. Imaginative and collaborative leadership is crucial in preventing or mitigating future national emergencies. (6)

For Further Reading

- Donald F. Kettl (2004). *System Under Stress: Homeland Security and American Politics*. CQ Press.
- Donald F. Kettl (2005). *The Global Public Management Revolution*. Brookings Institution Press, 2nd ed.
- Richard Posner (2004). *Catastrophe: Risk and Response*. Oxford University Press.
- National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004). *The 9/11 Commission Report*. W. W. Norton.
- Deil S. Wright (1988). *Understanding Intergovernmental Relations*. Brooks Cole, 3rd ed.