

*“Amid the debates, there remains one  
thing that is uncontested . . .  
‘Another failure is not an option.’”*

# THE DISASTER AFTER THE DISASTER

## *The Evolution and De-Evolution of FEMA*

PATRICK GARDNER

SINCE THE FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY'S (FEMA'S) INCEPTION DURING THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION IN 1979, IT HAS UNDERGONE A TUMULTUOUS HISTORY MARKED BY A SERIES OF PRAISED SUCCESSES AND GRAVE FAILURES. IN ITS EARLY STAGES, IT WAS HIGHLY CRITICIZED FOR SLUGGISH RESPONSES TO CRISES AS WELL AS PERVASIVE MISMANAGEMENT. JAMES LEE WITT REVOLUTIONIZED THE AGENCY, CREATING ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED AND EFFICIENT ORGANIZATIONS IN THE GOVERNMENT. ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE THOUGHT THE PROGRESS HE MADE WOULD BE LONG-LASTING, THE AGENCY FELL BACK INTO PUBLIC CRITICISM WITH A SERIES OF POOR OPERATIONS AFTER WITT'S DEPARTURE, BEGINING WITH THE 9/11 ATTACKS AND PEAKING WITH ITS MISMANAGEMENT OF THE HURRICANE KATRINA RESPONSE. THIS PAPER EXAMINES HOW WITT TRANSFORMED FEMA INTO A FUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATION, AS WELL AS WHY IT FELL APART DURING THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION. IT FOCUSES ON THE KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOW JAMES LEE WITT AND HIS SUCCESSORS HANDLED THE STAGES OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY.

## INTRODUCTION

*DISASTER. It strikes anytime, anywhere. It takes many forms—a hurricane, an earthquake, a tornado, a flood, a fire or a hazardous spill, an act of nature or an act of terrorism. It builds over days or weeks, or hits suddenly, without warning. Every year, millions of Americans face disaster, and its terrifying consequences.<sup>i</sup>*

So begins the description listed on the mission page for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This passage captures the frequency and unpredictability of disasters. In times of such crises, victims need help creating order out of chaos as local public services come to a halt. To this end, in 1979, President Carter combined many of the separate federal agencies related to disaster response into one over-arching organization, FEMA. The agencies absorbed included the Federal Insurance Administration, the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration, the National Weather Service Community Preparedness Program, the Federal Preparedness Agency of the General Services Administration, and the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration. In addition, civil defense responsibilities were also transferred to the new agency from the Defense Department's Defense Civil Preparedness Agency.<sup>ii</sup> The primary mission of the newly formed organization was:

*... to reduce the loss of life and property and protect the Nation from all hazards ... by leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.<sup>iii</sup>*

Despite the clarity with which FEMA's objectives are outlined in the agency's mission statement, many believe its performance in handling national emergencies has been less than satisfactory. This paper examines the mechanisms through which Director James Lee Witt transformed the agency into an efficient organization, as well as why these changes did not persist under the Bush Administration. Finally, I will describe the current opin-

ions on reforming the organization in the future.

## OVERCOMING A LEGACY OF FAILURE

Known to many as “the disaster after the disaster,” FEMA's reputation was that it “would lumber in after a catastrophe, and anger local officials with its ineptitude.”<sup>iv</sup> FEMA lived up to its reputation most egregiously after Hurricane Andrew struck southern Florida, causing the agency to



PRESIDENT CLINTON AND JAMES LEE WITT ANTICIPATE HURRICANE FLOYD.

come under public scrutiny. The hurricane leveled a 50-mile area, leaving 200,000 residents homeless and 1.3 million without electricity. Necessary materials such as food, clean water, and medical supplies were scarce, but FEMA was nowhere to be found until three full days after the crisis. When representatives finally arrived, “their incompetence further delayed relief efforts.”<sup>v</sup> The aid workers who arrived were grossly underprepared to meet the victims' needs. Food and water distribution centers did not have enough supplies, causing lines of hungry victims to stretch for miles. Even mobile hospitals arrived later than planned, adding to the chaos.<sup>vi</sup> Many wanted to have the organization disbanded after this debacle, but the Clinton administration decided to reform it.<sup>vii</sup> Part of this process included appointing a more capable management team, at the head of which Clinton placed James Lee Witt in 1993. This was, perhaps, the decisive move that allowed the organization to enjoy what some have called “one of the most remarkable

transformations of a government agency in recent memory.”<sup>viii</sup>

Only a year into his tenure as head of FEMA, Witt received widespread acclaim for his performance in handling the 1993 flooding of the Mississippi River. Congressman Norman Mineta, then chair of the committee that oversees the agency, was so impressed that he pronounced, “FEMA has delivered finally on its promise to stand with the American people when [natural disasters] . . . devastate their communities.”<sup>ix</sup> The newfound success appeared to be a lasting change for the agency. With approval levels higher than ever before, optimism for FEMA’s future skyrocketed. Jane Bullock, Witt’s chief of staff and a member of FEMA since 1980, went as far as to claim, “the reorganization and new systems that Witt installed at the agency ensure that we will never be the FEMA we were before.” Such optimism, however, becomes almost ironic in light of FEMA’s rapid descent into disfavor soon after Witt left office.

#### THE LEADERSHIP OF JAMES WITT

Since President Carter’s Administration formed FEMA in 1979, the agency had been known as one of the biggest abusers of the patronage system in the government. When George H.W. Bush took office, the number of political appointees to FEMA exceeded those named to other organizations tenfold.<sup>x</sup> Many of these individuals were “terribly inexperienced”<sup>xi</sup> for the job—a trait which impaired the agency’s ability to respond to disasters effectively.<sup>xii</sup> The presence of so many political appointees later gave President Clinton and James Witt freedom to replace them with new, more qualified individuals of their own choosing. Clinton also agreed to let Witt interview all potential appointees himself to ensure that he could surround himself with a proper managerial team.

Witt restructured the organization around such people as Elaine McReynolds, head of the Federal Insurance Administration, who served as the insurance commissioner of Tennessee for over seven years, and Carrye

Brown, head of the Fire Administration, whose résumé included working for eighteen years on Capitol Hill as a specialist in disaster and fire legislation.<sup>xiii</sup> By replacing many members of upper management with more experienced candidates, Witt was empowered to begin instituting reforms and taking action because he had a team he could trust to get the job done effectively. Another of Witt’s early innovations included asking senior civil servants at FEMA to rotate jobs, providing fresh perspectives on how all facets of the agency operated.<sup>xiv</sup>

After strengthening the managerial team with highly qualified individuals, Witt conducted a thorough review of FEMA’s mission, personnel, and its resources that lasted nearly two years. This included closing several redundant field offices and bolstering programs to prepare individual states for natural disasters. Witt also managed to decrease internal regulations by 12 percent in this time period, and he planned to reduce them by 50 percent by the end of the third year. Finally, Witt is noted for conducting a thorough inventory of FEMA—something which had never been done in the agency’s fourteen year history.<sup>xv</sup>

FEMA’s performance had historically been hampered by the fact that it was still preoccupied with preparing for nuclear attacks—part of the legacy of its inception during the Cold War. Nearly half of its budget and resources were reserved for such an attack, creating a severe handicap in handling natural disasters.<sup>xvi</sup> Witt decided to shift many assets, such as mobile communications vehicles that had been held in reserve in case of a nuclear war, to the front lines of disaster-stricken areas.<sup>xvii</sup> This new focus freed up one hundred disaster specialists, previously concerned with a nuclear attack, to deal with the organization’s new major focus: natural disasters.<sup>xviii</sup>

#### MITIGATION AND PREPAREDNESS UNDER WITT

Prior to joining FEMA, Witt had served as the head of the Arkansas Office of Emergency Services—a distinction which made him the only director in FEMA’s history to

have had previous disaster management experience.<sup>xix</sup> As a result, part of his success in turning around the agency can be attributed to his thorough understanding of successful emergency management strategies. These strategies, as described by Otto Lerbinger, follow four main processes:

1. *Mitigation*: attempting to minimize harm to human life and property;
2. *Preparedness*: improving the ability to respond to a crisis event;
3. *Response*: reducing damage through the activities undertaken immediately before, during, and after a crisis event; and
4. *Recovery*: stabilizing the stricken area and helping victims return to normalcy.<sup>xx</sup>

While Witt was successful in all four strategies, the majority of his success resulted from efforts in mitigation and preparedness. These strategies involved anticipating disasters and preparing for the types of relief they would require—actions that would make response efforts exponentially more effective. Witt first displayed his sharp foresight in his response to the 1993 Midwestern floods, the first major test he faced as FEMA director. Witt instituted a program to buy out property owners who were subject to chronic flooding and costly federal assistance so as to reduce the damage future floods would inflict. This process would have normally taken the program years to accomplish, according to Jerry Uhlmann, director of the Missouri Emergency Management Agency; however, Witt's persistence ensured that when floods hit parts of Missouri again in 1995, thousands of flooded parcels had already been vacated.<sup>xxi</sup> This is an excellent example of what Lerbinger describes as “passive” or nonstructural responses within the mitigation strategy. Passive responses are principally regulatory, usually involving zoning regulations to limit development in highly vulnerable areas.<sup>xxii</sup>

#### RESPONSE AND RECOVERY UNDER WITT

FEMA's inefficiency prior to Witt was largely due to the

agency's overly bureaucratic nature. FEMA workers would routinely suspend vital aid requests for lack of a single signature on a particular form.<sup>xxiii</sup> Kate Hale, director of the Dade County Emergency Services, attributes this passivity to the fact that “a mistake could cost [FEMA employees] their career.”<sup>xxiv</sup> The fear of losing one's job as a result of a single misstep was a considerable force for Witt to tackle.

*“Before Witt assumed office, relief efforts were discussed in terms of days and weeks; under his new direction, plans were implemented within hours.”*

This problem had long handicapped FEMA, and in 1990 it cost the people of Puerto Rico severely. As Hurricane Hugo raced towards Puerto Rico with 120 mile per hour winds, Governor Rafael Hernandez-Colon sent the proper federal aid request forms to FEMA headquarters in Washington. Unfortunately, as Franklin writes, “One scrupulous bureaucrat . . . noticed that the governor had failed to check one section of the form. Dutifully, the FEMA worker sent the request back—via the U.S. mail.”<sup>xxv</sup> This caused the forms to reach the island after Hugo hit, when the Puerto Ricans were recovering from the worst hurricane they had experienced in a century. They did so without federal aid, which did not arrive until several days later, after Hernandez-Colon had resubmitted the request forms with the appropriate check mark.

Such behavior was found intolerable in Witt's agency. The Oklahoma City bombing illustrates how the emphasis shifted from formalities to practical rapid disaster re-

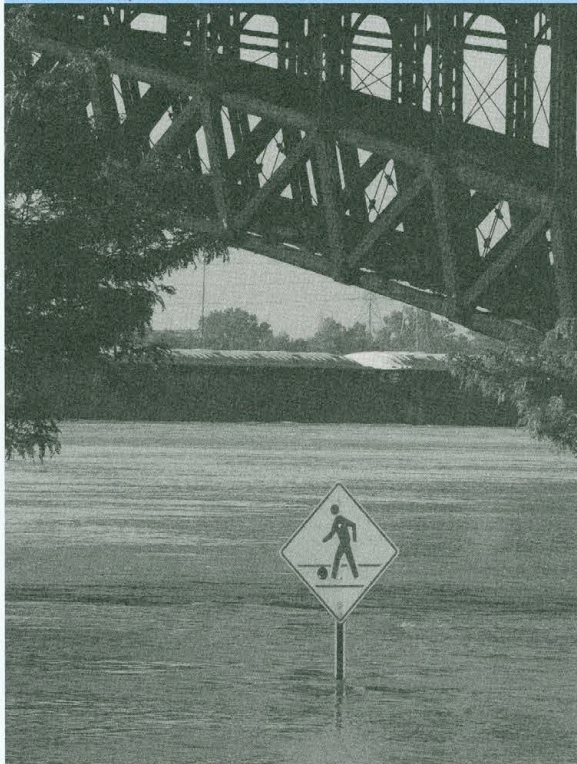
sponse. The bomb blasted at 9:02 AM. At 9:30, Tom Feuerborne, director of Oklahoma's Civil Emergency Management Department, called FEMA to request assistance. Less than five hours later, FEMA's advance team arrived, which included damage assessors and members of Witt's staff. Witt personally arrived on the scene at 8:10 that evening to be briefed on the situation. In the wee hours of the following morning, FEMA's search and rescue teams began to pour in, supplementing the efforts of the Oklahoma City fire department. Of the situation, Feuerbone says, "My office is very happy with the quick response of FEMA."<sup>xxvi</sup> Before Witt assumed office, relief efforts were discussed in terms of days and weeks; under his new direction, plans were implemented within hours. Witt had no interest in bureaucratic hang-ups. Instead, he demonstrated a genuine interest in bringing relief to the af-

flicted areas and ensuring that victims received the aid they needed.

Witt also understood that the previous policy of waiting to mobilize until asked for help by the local government was a mistake. As Witt himself said, "Before, it was wait for a governor to ask for help. You can't do that . . . I understood their problems, I understood what they wanted to do."<sup>xxvii</sup> He continued to stress the importance of pre-disaster planning, saying, "It's very important to understand that we're here to support the state and local governments as a resource . . . [We're] proactive. Instead of waiting on the hurricane to come in, we get there, pre-position everybody."<sup>xxviii</sup> Thus, before a disaster even reached, Witt had sent resources such as food, water, ice, and generators rolling toward the scene. After deploying approximately 1,000 workers to aid victims of Hurricane Floyd, FEMA officials faced a new problem, that of "restrain[ing] their workers from going out into the field while the storm was hitting."<sup>xxix</sup> Witt's emphasis on action contributed greatly to his success in office.

The true test of FEMA's success lay in the responses of victims of natural disasters. In 1994, FEMA issued 5,000 surveys to victims in order to gauge public perceptions of the agency's performance. They found that over 80 percent of the respondents approved of the way the agency was handling its duties—a percentage that would have been unthinkable in the days following FEMA's mishandling of Hurricane Andrew.<sup>xxx</sup> While Witt acknowledges that his experience as a local official in a rural county and later as the director of the Arkansas Office of Emergency Services provided invaluable training for his position atop FEMA,<sup>xxxi</sup> he points out a different reason for his success: "It is absolutely critical that you . . . redefine [an agency's] role and mission to what you feel is important for that agency to be responsible for."<sup>xxxii</sup> This statement becomes especially provocative in light of the changes that took place during the Bush administration.

UNDER WITT'S DIRECTION, FEMA PURCHASED PARCELS OF FREQUENTLY FLOODED LAND IN MISSOURI.



## RESTRUCTURE IN POST-9/11 AMERICA

James Witt turned FEMA around virtually overnight under his strong leadership and clear objectives, and it appeared as if his reforms would leave a lasting impression on the agency for years to come. In the year following his departure, however, America was struck with the worst attack on home soil in its history. After September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked two domestic jets and flew them into the World Trade Center, the nation's priorities changed drastically. Suddenly, terrorism was the primary threat and natural disasters became secondary.

In 2002, FEMA was removed from its independent status as an agency and restructured as a branch within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). President George W. Bush envisioned a new FEMA, which was to become a \$6 billion agency within DHS, but with a significantly different primary interest. Instead of being the primary responder, supervising and distributing major disaster relief, it was to become primarily a national security grant-giver, trainer, and coordinator for meeting terrorist threats.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Many, including new FEMA Director Joe M. Allbaugh, tried to reassure Congress that the homeland security functions would not deter the agency from its traditional role. Still, many people were not convinced that the newly reformed agency would still be able to respond to natural disasters in the same efficient manner that it had

under Witt. Rep. Don Young (R-AK), Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, quickly pointed out that, under the Bush proposal, if the new homeland security secretary wanted to shift its main focus to terrorist attacks, he could reduce "other [FEMA] missions and direct those resources entirely to security."<sup>xxxiv</sup> In response, select committee chairman Richard K. Armev (R-TX.) redrafted the Bush FEMA proposal. He proposed moving FEMA to DHS but preserving its role in responding to natural disasters. This would have lessened its burden for developing relief responses to terrorist attacks. President Bush quickly vetoed Armev's proposed measure in favor of a new FEMA concerned primarily with terrorist attacks.

Witt sharply criticized the action, stating that relocating FEMA would be "a mistake."<sup>xxxv</sup> He warned that the reorganization of FEMA had cost the organization many disaster response, recovery and mitigation specialists. He advised putting the preparedness office inside the new department, as Armev's bill would have done, but leaving FEMA outside and making it the coordinator under a federal response plan so that the Secretary of Homeland Security would have jurisdiction over it should there be a terrorist attack.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Later that year, Witt wrote a memo that was critical of the newly reformed agency. He reprimanded officials for not paying enough attention to how it would respond to a natural disaster because of its increased focus on terrorism. He argued further that the agency had moved away from the civil defense efforts that had increased natural disaster resources in the 1990s. He expressed his fear that in the post-9/11 hysteria, emphasis on homeland security was creating a potentially dangerous situation.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## FAILED PREPARATION UNDER THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

Under the new direction of the Bush Administration, FEMA became a shell of the organization Witt strove to rebuild. President Bush did not have the same interest as Clinton in strengthening federal response to natural disasters. Furthermore, he did not seem concerned with ap-

VICTIMS OF HURRICANE KATRINA DESPERATELY SEEK ASSISTANCE FROM THE SEEMINGLY ABSENT FEMA.



pointing the most qualified candidates to top positions in the organization. After Joe Allbaugh stepped down in March, 2003, Bush reverted to overt patronage by appointing his friend, Michael Brown, as Agency Undersecretary for FEMA. Before joining FEMA in 2001, Brown's prior experience consisted of nine years as commissioner of an Arabian horse association, making him the virtual opposite of Witt in terms of credentials.<sup>xxviii</sup> This is merely one example of a larger trend including many senior appointees, such as Patrick Rhode and Daniel Craig. Rhode previously worked for Bush's 2000 campaign while Craig served as a lobbyist for electric cooperatives.<sup>xxxix</sup>

FEMA's failure to prepare becomes even more apparent when one considers its inexperienced leadership in light of its new focus on terrorism. According to DHS Inspector General Richard Skinner, preparing responses to terrorist attacks overshadowed preparations for all other types of disasters.<sup>xl</sup> Over 75 percent of the agency's preparedness grants for 2006 were reserved for state and local responses to terrorism, which a Government Accountability Office report described as "a mismatch to reality."<sup>xli</sup> Many leaders of the National Emergency Management Association feared what might result from such negligence. This prompted five of the group's leaders to go to Washington to warn Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff of the impending danger just days before Hurricane Katrina struck. They argued that the change in FEMA's role was weakening their readiness for disasters. As the nation would soon find out, this message was highly prophetic.<sup>xlii</sup>

### STAFFING HANDICAPS

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall along the Gulf Coast. Hours later, and strangely one full day after being warned of the massive storm, Michael Brown sent a memorandum to his boss requesting 1,000 volunteers to support rescuers in the area. According to Brown, the volunteers were to be sent for training within 48 hours. Unfortunately, FEMA neglected to maintain its reserve force, which, in past emergencies, had been the heart and soul of its relief efforts.<sup>xliii</sup> This left the agency short-

*“President Bush did not have the same interest as Clinton in strengthening federal response to natural disasters.”*

handed in its relief efforts for the hurricane.

FEMA is structured to have a full-time workforce of roughly 2,500 employees, so the reservist program is designed to help the agency double or triple in size overnight when facing a disaster. These reservists perform many of the same tasks as full-time FEMA employees, such as helping to run disaster response centers, inspecting damage, manning telephone hotlines, assisting victims with claims, and coordinating relief activities with state and local officials.<sup>xliv</sup> The reserve force had withered in the years leading up to Katrina, with both the number of people on call and average training diminishing. George Haddow, FEMA's Deputy Chief of Staff under Clinton, believes that the agency's decision to increasingly use contractors hurt its ability to respond to disaster because the reservist force included some of the agency's most knowledgeable people. "They were an invaluable asset," he stated. "All FEMA's senior staff put together doesn't have as much experience with disasters as a single one of them."<sup>xlv</sup> In fact, a report by the House committee investigating the response to Katrina, identified the lack of qualified reserves as one of the biggest problems hampering FEMA's ability to act. The report explains that FEMA officials could only meet about half of their designed responsibilities. In the words of Scott Wells, the Deputy Federal Coordinating Official for the state, "We did not have the people . . . that we needed to do our mission."<sup>xlvi</sup>

The same report also found that FEMA had deep staffing



problems, which had worsened since 2002 when the agency was absorbed into DHS. The agency had lost a substantial number of its top disaster specialists, senior leaders and other experienced hands in a brain drain, which many experts believed would “negative[ly] impact . . . the federal government’s ability to manage disasters of all types.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Homeland Security officials could not preserve their employees through traditional human resources management, the House committee report explains, “and this failure hindered the response to Hurricane Katrina.”<sup>xlviii</sup> The extent of the staffing shortage was so great that when Katrina struck, nearly 500 jobs were vacant, and eight of ten regional FEMA directors were in acting capacity only.<sup>lix</sup> Those who did remain were unprepared to respond. By 2004, the report indicates, the readiness of FEMA’s emergency response teams “had plummeted dramatically” due to a decrease in funding after 2002, which caused them to lose communications equipment as well as team training and exercises. While FEMA officials warned that the teams were unprepared, the report notes that “no actions were taken to address the problems.”<sup>l</sup>

### WASTED FUNDS

FEMA’s inefficiency is, perhaps, most clearly revealed by the hundreds of millions of dollars it wasted while responding to Hurricane Katrina. Carelessness in issuing hurricane assistance exposed the agency to widespread fraud. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), which serves as an independent watchdog, randomly sampled 250 payments made to Katrina victims and found that 16 percent had been issued to fraudulent recipients.<sup>li</sup> If this is representative of FEMA’s spending overall, then fraudulent relief funds would amount to \$1 billion in misspent money, the GAO says.<sup>lii</sup> In addition to poor background checks, FEMA made extravagant expenditures on renovations. For example, the agency spent \$7.9 million to renovate a former army base in Alabama to shelter evacuees, but was only used for ten people each night, at a cost of roughly \$419,000 per person. This continued through 2006, as one government report estimates they spent \$30 million in maintaining trailers for evacuees in Mississippi.<sup>liii</sup> The

GAO further estimated that by not awarding jobs to the contractors with the lowest bids, FEMA misspent as much as \$16 million. Another \$15 million were spent on damage inspections that the agency could not prove had been performed.<sup>liv</sup> Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, expressed his disapproval, “The American taxpayer should be outraged . . . that in a six-month period FEMA managed to waste approximately half of the \$60 million it spent on trailers in Mississippi alone.”<sup>lv</sup>

### POST-KATRINA DISCOURSE

Since the “disaster after the disaster,”<sup>lvi</sup> many people have tried to sort through the wreckage—literally and metaphorically—and figure out who is exactly to blame, and what needs to be done to ensure that such a catastrophic failure never occurs again. Many have pointed to Michael Brown as the root of FEMA’s failures. His obvious inexperience made him a poor choice of leader during such a time, and e-mails between his press secretary and relief crews showed a lack of compassion for afflicted residents.<sup>lvii</sup> The full attention of the public eye turned to his performance following President Bush’s misguided praise, “Brownie, you’re doin’ a heck of a job.”<sup>lviii</sup> Although it is important for the president to express confidence in his appointees, his statement seemed like a bad joke in light of the poor relief efforts along the Gulf Coast, particularly in New Orleans. Brown eventually had to resign under the intense scrutiny following this comment.

Recently, though, disaster specialists and top government officials have argued that Brown is less to blame than previously thought. Videotapes and transcripts of disaster sessions that took place in the days surrounding Katrina show Brown and his team sounding the alarm of an impending disaster. Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, by contrast, were almost indifferent the day before Katrina as officials predicted that the levees around New Orleans would fail. The president asked no questions.<sup>lix</sup> While the Bush administration attacked Brown for “sidestepping the chain of command,” many of the same

disaster experts who had criticized his performance came to his defense.<sup>lx</sup> General Julius Becton, former FEMA director under Reagan, said he agreed with Brown's claim that he sidestepped Chertoff in order to bypass the "fog of bureaucracy" and speed up the relief effort. In other words Brown's belief that his superiors were not acting in FEMA's best interest left him "duty-bound" to bypass them in order to fill his role of disaster relief.<sup>lxi</sup>

*"Successful disaster relief begins with sympathy for the victims and dedication to the national response effort."*

Knight Ridder interviewed twelve disaster specialists and produced similar findings. Eleven of the twelve interviewed believed that Bush was at greater fault than Brown for the mishandling of the federal relief response in Katrina.<sup>lxii</sup> Seven believed Brown's depiction of events, while four believed both Brown and Chertoff were responsible, but that Bush was especially to blame for hiring them. More importantly, nearly all specialists interviewed chided the Bush administration for demoting FEMA from an independent agency into a branch of the massive Department of Homeland Security. Michael Lindell, director of the Natural Hazard Reduction and Recovery Center at Texas A&M University, placed the majority of blame on Chertoff because of his dual agenda of dealing with terrorism and fragmenting FEMA.<sup>lxiii</sup> James Witt summarized this sentiment well, saying, "I believe Brown . . . He tried to warn them . . . and nobody listened. I don't think DHS is ready to be in that coordinating role."<sup>lxiv</sup>

Such lack of confidence in the DHS FEMA has prompted major discourse about the organization's future. Greg Schneiders, who directed the reorganization project that originally created FEMA in 1979, attributes FEMA's ability to operate effectively to its "independence, stature, and direct access to the President," all of which had been lost under the Bush administration.<sup>lxv</sup> Schneiders notes that

Clinton, by contrast, understood this dynamic and praises his elevation of FEMA to full Cabinet status. Schneiders argues that the only effective solution would be to remove FEMA from the DHS and return it to independent, Cabinet-level status, where it can once again focus its attention to natural disasters and have direct access to the president. Restoring this access, Schneiders believes, will allow FEMA to be there to respond and do its job effectively.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Though the need for reform is virtually uncontested, many doubt that restoring FEMA's independent status is the appropriate action. James Loy, former Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security believes that those who advocate restoring FEMA's independent status are oblivious to the new environment that has developed since 9/11.<sup>lxvii</sup> He argues that separating FEMA from the DHS would limit the agency's access to many of the relief agencies which were incorporated into the new department in response to 9/11. The difference, he argues, is that FEMA should be given independent status within the DHS so that it can have direct lines of communication with the Secretary of Defense in times of crisis. The bureaucratic hang-ups must be disposed of and independent status would help the director of FEMA make quick and effective decisions.

A bipartisan Senate investigation in 2006 left senators calling for Bush to scrap the organization and begin anew, as Katrina exposed flaws in FEMA "too substantial to mend."<sup>lxviii</sup> This may be an unrealistic aspiration, however, as it would take far too long to rebuild a new agency with the sole focus of preparing for and responding to natural disasters. There are simpler ways to begin improving FEMA, such as electing agency directors based on disaster management experience rather than abusing the patronage sys-

tem. The agency cannot move forward without knowledgeable and confident leadership, such as that of James Lee Witt. He is spoken of as the wonder-child of FEMA's past, but perhaps he was only able to bring success to the organization because he was the first director in its history to have disaster management experience. Successful disaster relief begins with sympathy for the victims and dedication to the national response effort. While opinions differ in regards to what needs to be done with FEMA, its future depends entirely upon the next administration. Unless the Obama administration exercises genuine concern for staffing it with qualified individuals and making the sweeping reforms needed, the government might be forced to disband the agency. Amid the debates, there remains one thing that is uncontested: in the words of Harold Rogers, Chairman of the House Appropriations Panel for Homeland Security, "Another failure is not an option."<sup>lxix</sup> There is simply too much at stake to be left in the hands of another incompetent FEMA.

#### ENDNOTES

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- ii. *Ibid.*
- iii. *Ibid.*
- iv. Borenstein and Davis
- v. Franklin
- vi. *Ibid.*
- vii. *Ibid.*
- viii. Walsh
- ix. Franklin
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- xvii. Walsh
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