

Political Control and Operational Command: Building a Balanced Disaster Response System

Supplemental testimony provided to the
U.S. Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs Committee

March 22, 2006

Submitted by

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***Who should be in charge of orchestrating the federal government response
in the event of a catastrophic disaster?***

As a result of clear failures of preparation and performance in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, this question has recently received a good deal of attention by policy makers, commentators, the media, and the public.

We believe that this question is wrongly posed, that it is founded on incorrect premises, and that accepting its presumptions and trying to give a single answer to it – whether

through executive order or through legislation or through custom and practice – would be ill-advised.

Posing the question in this way – “*Who should be in charge?*” – misdirects attention because it presumes that there is one overall set of issues and actions to be in charge of, and that one person can and should be the nexus of responsibility for all of these issues, taken together. In the sense of accountability, that may be so – people will naturally look to one person (the President, ultimately, or some designee) as having “responsibility” for the effectiveness of the response. But in the sense of actual command, coordination, and direction, we believe it is not advisable to try to create one position with a span of control that extends across the array of challenges that a major catastrophe will present.

In this discussion, we are focused on the federal government and the organization of its response to catastrophic circumstances. We would make largely the same point, however, with reference to the management of crises by state and local governments – and especially in any circumstance where multiple levels of government are involved – that the emphasis on having a single official, charged with responsibility for all aspects of the response, is misplaced.

We think it is crucial to draw a distinction between two broadly different types of challenges that arise in major disasters. First, there is a set of largely *technical* issues that must be identified, confronted, and resolved. Who can reach the disaster area most quickly? What supplies are needed, and where are they now located? How can we best organize delivery of needed medical supplies? The distinguishing characteristic of technical issues is that, to a first approximation, and especially in the early hours and days of a catastrophe (when saving lives is the paramount imperative), *people largely agree on the priorities and values at stake* – and the issues, therefore, are mostly of an operational and tactical and logistical nature, focusing on the most efficient way to address the most critical agreed priorities. Capabilities, structures, systems, trained people, and effective operational leadership will be needed to address the challenges – but the objectives and order of priorities are largely shared and agreed.

By contrast, there is a second set of issues that are largely *political* in nature. In the immediate aftermath of catastrophe, the degree of alignment between the political values and interests of those involved in a disaster tends to be very high, but disagreements about political values and priorities tend to build as time moves along, reducing the harmony of interests that generally characterizes the early moments of a response. These issues – the priorities and values, the allocation of credit and blame, the positioning about competence and effectiveness and leadership – are emphatically *not* technical issues – they are, instead, fundamentally *political* issues.

As a catastrophic event evolves, other political functions also become crucial to effective handling of the situation. Once decisions have been reached, they need to be explained and warranted as the right decision; the public needs help in interpreting the events it is witnessing, and direction at how it should respond (think of Mayor Giuliani in the immediate aftermath of 9/11). Sometimes, sacrifices need to be asked for, and difficult

decisions need to be justified and popular support needs to be rallied in favor of the chosen course of action. All of these are, within our system, largely political actions – again, because they involve the balancing of competing political values and interests.

Thus, while there are surely technical issues that need to be faced, there are just as surely political issues that need to be addressed. We believe it imperative to distinguish these two different types of issues: (1) the *technical operational issues and operational command*, on the one hand, and (2) the *political issues and political direction of effort*, on the other. Effective management of both of these kinds of issues is crucial to overall excellence in disaster response performance – but these issues are of fundamentally different types; and they require different kinds of expertise, background, experience, and leadership style and action. It is possible that these two skill sets might reside in a single person, but it is at best uncommon, and it is unwise to base our hopes for assuring consistent excellence on the ability to locate a single individual with such disparate capacities. Moreover, any major disaster will create more than enough work of both types to occupy any designated leader fully – and having one person responsible for both will inevitably cause one set of challenges to compete with the other. In the aftermath of 9/11, Mayor Giuliani was a *consummate* political leader – while he was frequently depicted as heading the technical emergency response efforts, he in fact spent most of his time managing fundamentally political aspects of the events (providing interpretation and psychological motivation, modeling coping with trauma and loss, and generally addressing the larger values issues at stake). And he was able to do this – he was freed from the myriad of technical decisions that could otherwise have come to him – because he had a competent and practiced technical emergency response organization that was effectively processing the flow of technical decision-making (instead of delegating it upward, to him).

Proposal: designing a structure for both political and operational excellence

We propose, therefore, that:

- (1) **the federal response to disaster needs not *one* designated leader, but *two*** – one with political leadership authority and responsibility, and the other with operational command and coordination authority and responsibility;
- (2) **the official who has operational responsibility should be a trained professional with significant prior disaster management experience and expertise** – and we would recommend that the most senior official in this role, the head of FEMA or its successor agency, have a long-term appointment (like that of the FBI Director);
- (3) **the official who has political responsibility should be a senior and respected Cabinet-level (or higher) official** who can, where necessary, successfully direct other senior political officials in other agencies and

parts of the government to cooperate operationally with disaster response activities;

(4) as a structural matter, **the senior operational official should be subordinate to and should report to the senior political official;**

(5) **these two officials must have a close and mutually respectful working relationship** in which each understands and values the (different) role played by the other, and in which both work to maintain the distinction between the kinds of issues that lie in their respective domains; and

(6) **the response system (and training for work within it) should be designed to help clarify which issues are principally of an operational type and which are importantly political**, and to separate and parse them to their respective leaders.

Need for a professionally-qualified operational incident commander

There can be little doubt about the need for clarity of operational command for a given organization – be it a single entity or a joint effort by a collection of government agencies – in disaster situations. Crucially, the technical challenges faced by operational commanders are often complex and urgent. Fortunately, people with appropriate training and experience are generally able to handle them – or, at the very least, they handle them dramatically better than amateurs. Such people exist, and can be systematically developed. The middle of the operational command post for a catastrophic event is no place for the inexperienced or the untrained – it should be occupied only by trained, experienced, tried and true professionals in the operational management of disaster response.

The process of training a cadre of professional crisis response leaders and developing their experience through a sequence of assignments works in two related ways to build excellence in leadership for future events. First, undergoing the training and garnering the experience develops the skills of the individuals – they get better at handling operations in high-intensity, high-stress, rapidly evolving, time-critical situations. Second, and probably of even greater importance, their prior experience and performance allows us to choose and to advance those who, as a result of their training, experience, and talents, are most capable. Individual learning, combined with careful selection, is what provides assurance that we will have capable professionals whose performance will be dramatically better than that of amateurs.

Experience in the development of military and firefighting leaders bears out the importance of both the training and the selection processes as important contributors to leadership excellence and organizational performance. In both settings, high emphasis is placed on extensive training and practice. Over the course of a career, individual leaders accumulate training and experience, but their effectiveness in action is also observed

directly, and they are promoted in part on the basis of selection rooted in performance and results. The consequence is that those who emerge into senior leadership positions are those whose combination of training and experience and personal attributes, skills, and talents have proven most effective in smaller scale, but related, challenges.

Need for a respected and powerful political “commander”

In the early hours of a disaster, most participants in almost all capacities will broadly share a set of pre-eminent goals – saving and protecting lives, reducing damage to property, and so on. There are, of course, other interests at stake, but in the early moments these generally seem to almost everyone to be subordinate to the central concerns; the immediate life-safety issues trump other interests and concerns. As the over-arching goals are addressed, however, two other sets of issues tend to come to the fore. First, there come to be disagreements about the remaining priorities. Is it more important to direct transport resources to further aiding internally displaced people, or to begin repairs to infrastructure? If we can’t address all critical infrastructure issues at once, whose assets will be fixed first? These are fundamentally questions about values, and in our society these questions are largely addressed and played out in the political arena. Once immediate safety issues have been addressed, it is no longer a technical matter to determine whether, for example, displaced people should be further dispersed to other cities, or whether they should be housed in shelters or in hotels. These choices will have operational implications, but the operational issues embedded in them are not so crucial as to be dispositive (the way the earlier life-safety issues were in the first hours of the response). These issues involve making what are essentially political calls – what level of resources, attention, and concern should be provided for and to the various competing interests?

The second set of issues that tends to become more prominent is the competing personal and bureaucratic interests of the various people and agencies involved. Again, in the short run after a disaster, these interests are generally suppressed, silent, and latent. As more critical concerns are resolved, the underlying bureaucratic interests tend to be asserted. Which agency will get the resources – and the reputation – associated with having carried out critical parts of the response effort? Who (and what agencies) are seen as competent, and are being cited in the media as the heroes (and as the goats)? Obviously, these are also not technical matters – they are in effect internal political issues, having to do with the reputation and standing of different agencies (and individuals). They are *bureaucratic* politics, but politics, all the same.

Balancing the competing political value interests of different constituencies – whether of the public or of government or other agencies – is the distinctive competence of the political system and its senior officials – and it is emphatically *not* generally a good role for operational officials to play. Thus, in addition to experienced and professional operational direction, we need a designated *political* official to identify, examine, and resolve the competing political interests ... and to make sure that the actions required to carry out the political decisions are conveyed (1) to the operational people who will make

them happen; (2) to the constituencies affected; and (3) to the public at large. Political officials will, ultimately, be held responsible for the balancing of the competing interests – that is how and why they were chosen ahead of their competition in the last election – and they therefore need to be in a position to identify and engage these issues and render their determinations about them.

In our view, this implies the need for a senior and respected *political* official to “direct” the federal government’s political response to a catastrophic situation. Because response to a major catastrophe will necessarily involve the coordinated action by multiple federal agencies, it seems imperative that there be a mechanism for establishing, when necessary, a senior Cabinet-level official (or, possibly, in some instances, an even higher level official -- the Vice President) as the designated federal political official in charge of the nation’s political decision-making about the evolving event. (Obviously, there is always one such official – the President. The idea is to permit the President to designate, where possible, a lower-level official to carry the burdens of a particular incident, with consultation with the President as the President may see fit.) That the designated official needs to be of Cabinet rank or above follows from the need to be able to enforce both political and operational coordination across the agencies – the capability, for example, to cut through a bureaucratic dispute between agencies by prevailing upon a fellow Cabinet colleague to invoke his or her authority to get things moving in an agency that is dragging its feet. To have the requisite capability, the designated official will have to have the rank, the relationships, and the respect necessary to mobilize his or her Cabinet colleagues. Importantly, this is a challenge of exercising influence and not an operational task – and expertise in operational crisis management is neither necessary to it nor necessarily even particularly helpful in achieving it.

Any large scale event in this country will almost automatically involve multiple jurisdictions and multiple levels of government, and this provides another strong reason to insure that the senior federal political official has significant influence, authority, stature, and rank. In our Constitutional system, Mayors and Governors do not directly report to federal officials – they occupy, in their own systems, the apex of existing stature and authority. When political issues arise that require coordination across these different hierarchies of authority – as they inevitably will and do in any significant disaster – the senior federal official in charge of managing the political decision-making for the event needs to be of a stature that allows him or her to deal directly with the most senior officials in other hierarchies – without giving insult to their sensibilities. This requires someone with seniority, influence – and tact.

Relationship between political and operational commanders

In our system, political officials are given the ultimate authority, so as a structural matter the senior operational official should report to the senior designated political official. We envision an arrangement like that embodied in the military chain of command. Structurally, the President and the Secretary of Defense are at the top of the chain of command, and from a technical perspective they can therefore issue any orders they

want. Realistically, however, this structure is designed not to encourage the substitution of civilian judgment for professional military judgment of generals and admirals, but rather to provide for civilian *oversight*, from a policy (rather than from an operational) perspective, of the nation's military actions. By analogy, the senior operational disaster response official could technically be overruled by the senior political official to whom he or she technically reports – but in practice this should be (extremely) rare.

We believe that it would be advisable to have the senior operational official serve for a fixed term, to vest a degree of independent, professional authority in the office. Statutory qualifications for the job should include prior training, experience – and success – in the operational command of disaster response.

While it is possible that in some cases the senior political and senior operational official could be the same person, we do not see a prospect that the nation will very often have as one of its senior political officials someone with the requisite operational experience, training, skills and expertise to combine the operational and political functions we have identified – and, at the very least, we think it would be a bad idea to rely on this consistently being possible. Conversely, we think it unlikely that people with the requisite operational background, training, skills, and expertise will very often also enjoy the respect *as a political decision-maker* of the most senior federal political officials – and, at a minimum, we think it risky to assume that such an individual can always be in the relevant role at the right time.

Furthermore, we believe it is both possible and desirable largely to separate the technical operational issues from the political issues. At the edges, of course, there will always be overlap – serving one set of interests rather than another (a political call) will have operational implications, and operational choices will influence how possible or easy it is to serve different constituencies. Thus, at the margin, the *policy and values* decisions will influence the *technical and operational* decisions, and vice versa. It is, therefore, in some sense, a fiction that they can be completely separated. But it is in our view a *useful* fiction, in the sense that *working on trying to separate them is useful and likely to improve both political and operational decision-making*.

The senior operational official and the senior designated political official will need to work in very close concert. In particular, many of the issues with significant political content will first arise as operational questions, and will come up through the operational “chain of command.” The question of how best to house the displaced people will, in the first instance, be confronted by technical managers. If, from a technical perspective, there is no real alternative (or if the best alternative is so much better from a technical perspective than the next best that any possible political implications would be small by comparison), then the decision is a technical one and should be made by the operational command. By contrast, when decisions about this issue will have significant political consequences, and there are real choices among viable technical alternatives with different political interests, the political elements need to be identified as a feature of the issue, and those aspects of the decision need to be examined by those responsible for balancing political considerations. This implies that, at all levels of the operational

command, the identification of political concerns is an important part of defining the issues.

As political issues surface – whether through the operational channels or otherwise – they have to be framed and resolved by the politically-responsible officials. This will necessitate close coordination between the senior political official and the senior operational official. Key to this relationship is mutual respect for the importance of the respective issues and respect for each other’s differing responsibilities and skills. Operational officials need to help frame the political issues that are arising and seek guidance about them. They need to keep political officials informed about the operational situation and the operational decisions they are making. Operational officials need to avoid treating as technical matters issues that have deep political content. (Conversely, political officials need to refrain from asking operational officials to pretend that issues with political content have to be resolved on technical grounds.) And political officials need to keep from interfering with what are largely technical decisions, reserving their authority for the issues where political concerns are of great importance. And on the issues where there are both important political *and* operational issues at stake, the two need to work together to resolve the questions.

We are not naïve enough to imagine that such an idealistic description will be self-executing. Making the system work in this way will not always be perceived as in the immediate self interest of the participants. It will require three inter-related elements:

First, *structural relationships* – a set of rules and expectations and norms about how people in these roles will behave – both independently and with regard to one another – and what constitutes legitimate and professional behavior;

Second, *practice* – repeated opportunities to enact the rule, expectations, and norms and carry out (either in simulations or in real situations); and

Third, *personal relationships* – the development of trust and mutual respect between people in different roles, based on appreciation of the importance of the role played by the other.

In short, this calls for an operational official who is sensitive to political matters – that is, who can recognize the political concerns and help frame them for a political decision-maker. It also calls for a political official who has some familiarity with operational disaster response – at least enough to understand how severe the risks will be if he or she starts second-guessing operational decisions.

Conclusion

Since, in any major catastrophe, there is more than enough work to do of both operational and political kinds to keep multiple senior officials fully engaged, and since the political and operational issues can usually be reasonably readily divided, and since the skills and

background necessary for these two roles are significantly different, it makes sense to have different officials working on them – in close coordination with one another, but separately. Both roles require a high degree of professionalism – but professionalism of different kinds. In a complex, urgent, confusing, high-intensity, rapidly-evolving, high-stress catastrophic event, the nation needs to have the services of a political professional to manage the conflicting priorities and values and to warrant and communicate the political decisions to a wide array of constituencies **and** the services of a seasoned, trained, experienced professional, proved in the crucible of earlier experiences, to command the operational response.

We hope that in your committee's work to redesign and oversee DHS, you will provide for both – for two answers, rather than one, to the question, "*Who should be in charge?*"