

Federal Emergency Management Agency blocking relief supplies

Katrina reveals the presidential flaws

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What is more unbelievable? Aaron Broussard, president of Jefferson parish, reporting that the Federal Emergency Management Agency was still blocking relief supplies to this Louisiana district: “We had Wal-Mart deliver three trailer trucks of water. Fema turned them back. They said we didn’t need them. This was a week ago. We had 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel on a Coast Guard vessel docked in my parish. The Coast Guard said: ‘Come get the fuel right away.’ When we got there with our trucks, they got a word: ‘Fema says don’t give you the fuel.’ Yesterday, Fema comes in and cuts all of our emergency communication lines”?

Or Fema’s decision to keep the Red Cross from sending supplies and medical personnel into New Orleans. The Red Cross reports: “We simply cannot enter New Orleans against their orders . . . (They say) our presence would keep people from evacuating and encourage others to come into the city”?

Or the fact that neither the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana or Fema rolled a single busload of refugees out of the city before Hurricane Katrina hit?

Or that when Richard Daley, Chicago’s mayor, offered Fema help before Hurricane Katrina hit, Fema said “no”?

Or the claim by Michael Chertoff, the Department of Homeland Security head, that Katrina “exceeded the foresight of the planners and maybe anybody’s foresight” coupled with the comments of his deputy, Fema head Michael Brown, that Katrina was a Category 4 hurricane that “caused the same kind of damage that we anticipated. So we planned for it two years ago”?

Or George W. Bush’s claim that he was “satisfied with the response” his administration had made to Hurricane Katrina, although he agreed that the results were not acceptable?

Or Mr Brown’s claim that on the Saturday before the hurricane struck “it was my belief . . . any hurricane is bad – but we had the standard hurricane coming in here, that we could move in immediately on Monday and start doing our kind of response-recovery effort” while, at that moment, Ivor van Heerden, deputy director of Louisiana State University’s hurricane centre, was saying that all indications are that “this is absolutely worst-case scenario”, that “we’re talking about . . . a refugee camp of 1m people” and that his computer simulations indicated that New Orleans could be flooded by 30 feet of water?

Or these remarks by James Lee Witt, who was Fema director under President Bill Clinton: “In the 1990s, in planning for a New Orleans nightmare scenario, the federal government figured it would pre-deploy nearby ships with pumps to remove water from the below-sea-level city and have hospital ships nearby. These things need to be planned and prepared for; it just doesn’t look like it was” ?

Which of these is worst? I do not know.

Let us ask another question: should we be surprised at this? After all, this is the administration that staffed our reconstruction effort in Iraq with young conservative activists with resumes on file at rightwing think-tanks, that refused to recognise that what we faced in Iraq was an insurgency rather than “dead-enders”; that found it extraordinarily difficult to get personal and vehicle armour to US soldiers in Iraq, that advanced a Medicare drugs bill that seems destined to generate huge profits for pharmaceutical companies – for Medicare is forbidden to bargain on price – for mediocre improvements in drug coverage, that turned America’s hard-won fiscal surpluses into deficits that threaten the health of the economy. We could go on.

Yes, we should be surprised. Fema is a “bureaucracy”. A bureaucracy is designed to keep functioning even when it is headed by a man who was suddenly told by his private-sector bosses to find a new job and whose only qualification is that he is the friend of a friend of the president. When faced with a situation, you pull out the plans and you follow the standard operating procedures. When hurricanes threaten the Gulf coast, you pre-position hospital and rescue ships offshore. You have a meeting beforehand and ask: “if this truly goes south – much worse than we are expecting – what things will we wish a month from now that we had done today?” In the case of New Orleans, you know that there will be floods so you prepare to drop support from the air.

But here the plans were not pulled out of the filing cabinets, the standard operating procedures were not followed, and the “what will we wish we had done?” meetings were apparently not held. In any other form of government besides that of the US – where the president has the formal legal powers of the 18th-century British monarch, and where each party’s presidential candidate emerges from an undignified struggle among party activists – Mr Bush would have been eased out by now. The barons of his party would have told him that he had to step aside.

It would be better for the country and for the Republican party, if America found a way to ensure its future presidential candidates have some skill in public administration.

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