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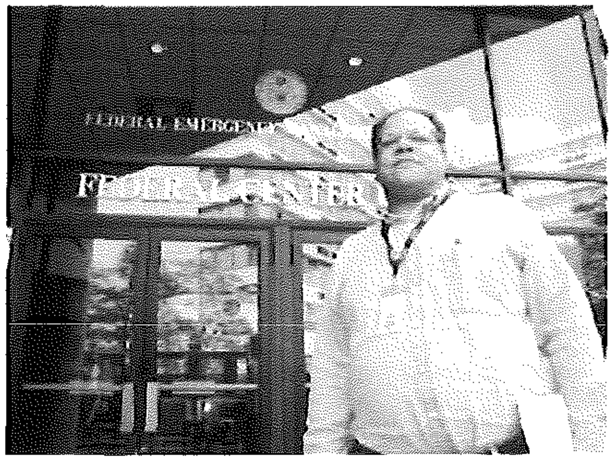
A Disaster Waiting to Happen

As FEMA weathers a storm of Bush administration policy and budget changes, protection from natural hazards may be trumped by "homeland security"

By Jon Elliston



Pleasant Mann, a 16-year FEMA veteran who heads the agency's government employee union.
Jon Elliston

Fridays don't get much busier than this. It's the morning of Sept. 3, and Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., is running at a full clip, having mobilized a cadre of disaster-response specialists in its National Emergency Operations Center the day before. "This is our 'war room,'" a FEMA employee explains.

"Right now we're in 24-hours-a-day activation," he says. "It's a double-whammy." Indeed, the agency is still busy helping Florida recover from Hurricane Charley's punishing winds and rain when satellite images show that an even greater storm, Hurricane Frances, will soon make landfall. It appears so threatening that most of FEMA's personnel on the ground, along with 2.5 million Floridians, have evacuated from the storm's projected path.

Inside the op center, scores of personnel from FEMA and a host of other agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the Coast Guard, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Health and Human Services, buzz around in what appears to be a state of controlled chaos. They work the phones, hover over computer screens and trade the latest weather forecasts. Using a time-tested system of disaster management, they've split their tasks into 12 "emergency support functions" designed to bring in food, water, medical care, electricity, housing, transportation and other desperately needed resources as soon as Frances moves on.

John Crowe, a Department of Homeland Security geospatial mapping expert detailed to FEMA to help track such outbreaks of rough weather, steps outside the building for a quick cigarette. "Everybody's really running into gear here," he says between puffs. "FEMA's ready, about as ready as they've ever been."

FEMA's relatively quick response to the hurricanes has thus far won mostly high marks from Florida officials, who remember well a time when the disaster agency seemed the last party to show up after catastrophes. In addition, President Bush has paid multiple visits to assure storm victims they will get whatever help is needed, and he promptly secured more than $2 billion from Congress to fund Florida's recovery.

As storms continue to batter the Panhandle, no one would call Florida lucky. But with national elections just around the corner, the hurricanes could scarcely have hit at a better time or place for obtaining federal disaster assistance. "They're doing a good job," one former FEMA executive says of the Bush administration's response efforts. "And the reason why they're doing that job is because it's so close to the election, and they can't fuck it up, otherwise they lose Florida--and if they lose Florida, they might lose the election."

Such political considerations may indeed make this round of recoveries go better than most. But long before this hurricane season, some emergency managers inside and outside of government started sounding an alarm that still rings loudly. Bush administration policy changes and budget cuts, they say, are sapping FEMA's longterm ability to cushion the blow of hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tornados, wildfires and other natural disasters.

Among emergency specialists, "mitigation"--the measures taken in advance to minimize the damage caused by natural disasters--is a crucial part of the strategy to save lives and cut recovery costs. But since 2001, key federal disaster mitigation programs, developed over many years, have been slashed and tossed aside. FEMA's Project Impact, a model mitigation program created by the Clinton administration, has been canceled outright. Federal funding of post-disaster mitigation efforts designed to protect people and property from the next disaster has been cut in half, and now, communities across the country must compete for pre-disaster mitigation dollars.

As a result, some state and local emergency managers say, it's become more difficult to get the equipment and funds they need to most effectively deal with disasters. In North Carolina, a state regularly damaged by hurricanes and floods, FEMA recently refused the state's request to buy backup generators for emergency support facilities. And the budget cuts have halved the funding for a mitigation program that saved an estimated $8.8 million in recovery costs in three eastern N.C. communities alone after 1999's Hurricane Floyd. In Louisiana, another state vulnerable to hurricanes, requests for flood mitigation funds were rejected by FEMA this summer.

Consequently, the residents of these and other disaster-prone states will find the government less able to help them when help is needed most, and both states and the federal government will be forced to shoulder more recovery costs after disasters strike.

In addition, the White House has pushed for privatization of essential government services, including disaster management, and merged FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security, where natural disaster programs are often sidelined by counter-terrorism programs. Along the way, morale at FEMA has plummeted, and many of the agency's most experienced personnel have left for work in other government agencies or private corporations.

In June, Pleasant Mann, a 16-year FEMA veteran who heads the agency's government employee union, wrote members of Congress to warn of the agency's decay. "Over the past three-and-one-half years, FEMA has gone from being a model agency to being one where funds are being misspent, employee morale has fallen, and our nation's emergency management capability is being eroded," he wrote. "Our professional staff are being systematically replaced by politically connected novices and contractors."

So while they're far from where hurricanes hit hardest, FEMA's Washington-based disaster managers find themselves in the middle of a perfect storm of their own.

"All hazards"

FEMA has dealt with disasters since long before the term "homeland security" came into vogue after the 9/11 attacks.

Created by President Jimmy Carter in 1979 to handle the country's worst-case scenarios, FEMA has always struggled to define its precise mission. In theory, it's responsible for "all hazards," which means the agency coordinates efforts to keep the United States safe from the full spectrum of domestic dangers, be they "acts of God" like weather emergencies or acts of human enemies like al Qaeda terrorists.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration endowed FEMA with extraordinary powers to keep the country running--powers bordering on martial law, critics argued. The agency became responsible for "continuity of government" plans devoted to salvaging national authority in the event of a nuclear attack. Other plans, drafted by the likes of National Security Council aide Oliver North, laid the groundwork for rounding up rabble-rousers in the event of societal breakdown, whatever the cause. (The troubling implications of the agency's early work had a long legacy in popular culture, thanks to the *X-Files* TV show and movie, which often referenced the specter of how FEMA-rule would supplant constitutional government.)

As the Cold War ended, FEMA turned greater attention to handling natural disasters, but the agency proved unequal to the task. In August 1992, Hurricane Andrew assaulted Florida and other Southern states with 170-mile-an-hour winds, killing 23 people and leaving a trail of devastation. The severity of the storm caught FEMA off-guard, and the agency did too little, too late to help the state recover, enraging thousands of storm victims. Several days after Andrew dissipated, Dade County's emergency manager famously pleaded, "Where the hell is the cavalry?"

Two months later, President George H.W. Bush paid a price of sorts at the polls when Bill Clinton shrunk the incumbent's once-sizable lead and came within two percentage points of beating Bush in Florida. It was an important lesson learned for both the politicians and the emergency agency.

In 1993, President Clinton's new FEMA director, James Lee Witt, set the agency on a corrective course. Witt, who had served under then-Gov. Clinton as director of Arkansas emergency management, embarked on an ambitious campaign to bulk up the agency's natural disaster programs while staying prepared for "all hazards." Witt's changes eventually reversed FEMA's reputation for being unfocused and ineffective. The agency garnered praise from both Democrats and Republicans for improving coordination with state and local emergency offices and turning attention and resources to the benefits of disaster mitigation.

"Mitigation is the cornerstone of emergency management," a FEMA Web site explains today. "It's the ongoing effort to lessen the impact disasters have on people's lives and property." Under mitigation plans, houses in flood plains are moved or raised above the flood-line, buildings are designed to withstand hurricane winds and earthquakes, and communities are relocated away from likely wildfire zones. According to FEMA estimates, every dollar spent on mitigation saves roughly two dollars in disaster recovery costs.

The need for more systematic mitigation efforts was driven home by 1996's Hurricane Fran, which killed 37 people and caused tens of billions of dollars in damages. In 1997, Witt established Project Impact, which would become the agency's most high-profile mitigation program.

Under the project, FEMA fostered partnerships between federal, state and local emergency workers, along with local businesses, to prepare individual communities for natural disasters. Impact partnerships sprang up in all 50 states. In Seattle, Wash., for example, the grants were used to retrofit schools, bridges and houses at risk from earthquakes. In Pascagoula, Miss., the project funded the creation of a database of structures in the local flood plain--crucial information for preparing mitigation plans. In several eastern North Carolina communities, it helped fund and coordinate buyouts of houses in flood-prone areas.

By the time the Bush administration entered office in January 2001, some 250 communities had signed up for Project Impact. FEMA seemed sturdy, having found its role and proved itself capable of fulfilling it. But in the field of emergency management, some things can change as quickly as the weather.

Bush's FEMA

From its first months in office, the Bush administration made it clear that emergency programs, like much of the federal government, were in for a major reorientation.

At FEMA, President Bush appointed a close aide, Joe Allbaugh, to be the agency's new director. Allbaugh had served as then-Gov. Bush's chief of staff in Texas and as manager of his 2000 presidential campaign. Along with Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, Allbaugh was known as one part of Bush's "iron triangle" of professional handlers.

Some FEMA veterans complained that Allbaugh had little experience in managing disasters, and the new administration's early initiatives did little to settle their concerns. The White House quickly launched a government-wide effort to privatize public services, including key elements of disaster management. Bush's first budget director, Mitch Daniels, spelled out the philosophy in remarks at an April 2001 conference: "The general idea--that the business of government is not to provide services, but to make sure that they are provided--seems self-evident to me," he said.

In a May 15, 2001, appearance before a Senate appropriations subcommittee, Allbaugh signaled that the new, stripped-down approach would be applied at FEMA as well. "Many are concerned that federal disaster assistance may have evolved into both an oversized entitlement program and a disincentive to effective state and local risk management," he said. "Expectations of when the federal government should be involved and the degree of involvement may have ballooned beyond what is an appropriate level."

As a result, says a disaster program administrator who insists on anonymity, "We have to compete for our jobs--we have to prove that we can do it cheaper than a contractor." And when it comes to handling disasters, the FEMA employee stresses, cheaper is not necessarily better, and the new outsourcing requirements sometimes slow the agency's operations.

William Waugh, a disaster expert at Georgia State University who has written training programs for FEMA, warns that the rise of a "consultant culture" has not served emergency programs well. "It's part of a widespread problem of government contracting out capabilities," he says. "Pretty soon governments can't do things because they've given up those capabilities to the private sector. And private corporations don't necessarily maintain those capabilities."

The push for privatization wasn't the only change that raised red flags at FEMA. As a 2004 article in the *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* would later note, "Allbaugh brought about several internal, though questionably effective, reorganizations of FEMA. The Bush-Allbaugh FEMA diminished the Clinton administration's organizational emphasis on disaster mitigation."

In February 2001, for example, the Bush administration proposed eliminating Project Impact, a move approved by Congress later in the year. (On the very day the White House proposal was submitted, a magnitude 6.8 earthquake rocked Washington state, which was home to several communities where Project Impact had sponsored quake mitigation efforts.) Ending the project and trimming other FEMA programs, the White House argued, would save roughly $200 million. In its place, FEMA instituted a new program of mitigation grants that are awarded on a competitive basis.

The administration also made a failed attempt to cut the federal percentage of large-scale natural disaster preparedness expenditures. Since the 1990s, the federal government has paid 75 percent of such costs, with states and municipalities funding the other 25 percent. The White House's attempt to reduce the federal contribution to 50 percent was defeated in Congress.

At the same time, Allbaugh gave off contradictory signals on the value of mitigation, on one occasion chastising a community for doing too little to prepare in advance for disaster. In April 2001, he caused a stir when he asked Iowans, then in the midst of massive flood recovery efforts, "How many times will the American taxpayer have to step in and take care of this flooding, which could be easily prevented by building levees and dikes?"

A month later, the *Washington Post* reported that the Bush administration's moves against mitigation programs were causing worries in disaster-prone states. "Statehouse critics of the proposed cuts contend that in the long run they would cost the government more because many communities will be unable to afford preventative measures and as a result will require more relief money when disasters strike," the newspaper noted.

By ignoring the logic of fully-funded mitigation and other preparedness programs, Bush's first FEMA director earned some scorn among emergency specialists. "Allbaugh? He was inept," says Claire Rubin, a senior researcher at George Washington University's Institute for Crisis, Disaster and Risk Management. "He was chief of staff for Bush in Texas--that was his credential. He didn't have an emergency management background, other than the disasters he ran into in Texas, and he wasn't a very open guy. He didn't want to learn anything."

Allbaugh's troubled tenure at the agency would be a relatively short one. In December 2002, he announced he would leave his post. While political observers expected Allbaugh to join the Bush re-election effort, instead he set about creating a string of lobbying firms, including New Bridge Strategies, which helps U.S. companies win reconstruction contracts in Iraq. This summer, he started another consulting company with Andrew Lundquist, the former director of Vice President Dick Cheney's secretive energy policy task force. The firm's first client was Lockheed Martin, one of the country's largest defense contractors.

The merger

The early problems at Allbaugh's FEMA, nettlesome as they were, paled in comparison to the challenges the agency faced after 9/11. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, leading members of Congress pushed for a radical restructuring of the government's anti-terrorism apparatus. Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) proposed legislation to merge several federal agencies into a new security-focused umbrella department. At first, the White House opposed the plan, calling it impractical and unnecessary.

But then, as former counter-terrorism czar Richard Clarke explained in his recent book *Against all Enemies*, "the White House legislative affairs office began to take a head count on Capitol Hill." Realizing that the Lieberman Bill would likely pass both houses of Congress, with no credit given to the White House, in June 2002 the administration changed its tune, calling for a new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that would be even larger than the one Lieberman had proposed.

Under the administration's plan, 22 government agencies, FEMA among them, would be merged into the DHS. Analysts in and out of government warned against subsuming the emergency agency's vital functions in a new super-department. "There are concerns of FEMA losing its identity as an agency that is quick to respond to all hazards and disasters," the agency's inspector general noted in a memo to Allbaugh. Congress' Government Accountability Office judged the merger to be a "high-risk" endeavor for FEMA, and the Brookings Institution, a leading Washington think-tank, cautioned in a report that such a move could hobble the agency's natural disaster programs. "While a merged FEMA might become highly adept at preparing for and responding to terrorism, it would likely become less effective in performing its current mission in case of natural disasters as time, effort and attention are inevitably diverted to other tasks within the larger organization."

But Bush's proposal won out, and a shift in priorities from natural disasters to counter-terrorism immediately took hold. In its 2002 budget, the White House doubled FEMA's budget to $6.6 billion, but of that sum, $3.5 billion was earmarked for equipment and training to help states and localities respond to terrorist attacks.

Michael Brown, a college friend of Allbaugh's who had served as FEMA's general counsel, was recruited to head the agency, which would now be part of the DHS's Emergency and Response Directorate. When the reorganization took effect on March 1, 2003, Brown assured skeptics that under the new arrangement, the country would be served by "FEMA on steroids"--a faster, more effective disaster agency.

But the merger into DHS has compounded the agency's problems, says FEMA employee and union president Pleasant Mann. "Before, we reported straight to the White House, and now we've got this elaborate bureaucracy on top of us, and a lot of this bureaucracy doesn't think what we're doing is that important, because terrorism isn't our number one," he said. "The biggest frustration here is that we at FEMA have responded to disasters like Oklahoma City and 9/11, and here are people who haven't responded to a kitchen fire telling us how to deal with terrorism. You know, there were a lot of people who fell down on the job on 9/11, but it wasn't us."

The FEMA program administrator says the crux of the problem is that the agency is buried in DHS, which is regarded as a "do-nothing agency" among FEMA's action-oriented staff. "You know, FEMA could do well by itself, and FEMA was starting to do well by itself. But that's changed."

Rubin, the George Washington University researcher, agrees with these assessments. "DHS has done a number of things to FEMA that are making it very, very hard for FEMA to function as it used to," she says. "A large number of people who are experienced with natural hazards no longer are doing that primarily or at all."

On Aug. 4, 2003, Brown announced that FEMA would at least be permitted to keep its name, if not its status as an independent agency. He has insisted that FEMA will stay prepared for "all hazards," even the non-terrorist ones. "Yes, it's a new world, it's a dangerous world, and the Department of Homeland Security will have a focus on terrorism, but it's not the only focus," he said in early 2003.

But the tension between Brown's competing duties has proven unavoidable. In May 2003, for example, the DHS staged TOPOFF 2--officially billed as "the largest homeland security exercise in the history of the United States"--to test the government's ability to deal with a terrorist attack with weapons of mass destruction. The same week of the exercise, hundreds of real-life tornadoes ripped through the Midwest, causing some FEMA staffers to find themselves torn between practicing for terrorism and handling an actual natural disaster. And while resources for the DHS exercise were readily available, according to Mann, FEMA's headquarters staff was forced, that same summer, to cancel disaster training drills due to budget shortfalls.

Whither mitigation?

In 2003, Congress approved a White House proposal to cut FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) in half. Previously, the federal government was committed to invest 15 percent of the recovery costs of a given disaster in mitigating future problems. Under the Bush formula, the feds now cough up only 7.5 percent.

Such post-disaster mitigation efforts, specialists say, are a crucial way of minimizing future losses. It's after a disaster strikes, they argue, that the government can best take the steps necessary to avoid repeat problems, because that's when officials and storm victims are most receptive to mitigation plans.

Larry Larson is executive director of the Association of State Floodplain Managers, an organization that keeps a close eye on mitigation matters. The Bush administration, he says, is "being penny-wise and pound foolish" by cutting the HMGP formula. His group has pressed Congress to restore the federal investment to 15 percent of disaster costs, and he expects that some legislators will soon take up the cause on their own. "Florida's going to be looking for mitigation money so that they can rebuild in a safer fashion," he says. "I'm sure that the Florida delegation is going to be thinking now about how the state can't do what's needed with the recent cuts in post-disaster mitigation--how they can't do today what they could have done before."

Pressed on this issue, Bush administration officials have said that the formula puts more of the mitigation burden on state governments, where it belongs. But the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) points out that, now more than ever, cash-strapped states cannot afford to pick up the balance. "The federal focus on terrorism preparedness has left states with an increased responsibility to provide support for natural disasters and emergencies," noted a report released by the association this summer. "State budget shortfalls have given emergency management programs less to work with, at a time when more is expected of them. In fiscal year 2004, the average budget for a state emergency management agency was $40.8 million, a 23 percent reduction from fiscal year 2003."

The administration also argues that its new pre-disaster mitigation grants, which are awarded on a competitive basis, will help states pick up the slack. But again, emergency managers say it's not enough. In recent congressional testimony, a NEMA representative noted that "in a purely competitive grant program, lower income communities, those most often at risk to natural disaster, will not effectively compete with more prosperous cities.... The prevention of repetitive damages caused by disasters would go largely unprepared in less-affluent and smaller communities."

And indeed, some in-need areas have been inexplicably left out of the program. "In a sense, Louisiana is the flood plain of the nation," noted a 2002 FEMA report. "Louisiana waterways drain two-thirds of the continental United States. Precipitation in New York, the Dakotas, even Idaho and the Province of Alberta, finds its way to Louisiana's coastline." As a result, flooding is a constant threat, and the state has an estimated 18,000 buildings that have been repeatedly damaged by flood waters--the highest number of any state. And yet, this summer FEMA denied Louisiana communities' pre-disaster mitigation funding requests.

In Jefferson Parish, part of the New Orleans metropolitan area, flood zone manager Tom Rodrigue is baffled by the development. "You would think we would get maximum consideration" for the funds, he says. "This is what the grant program called for. We were more than qualified for it."

Brain drain

Within FEMA, the shift away from mitigation programs is so pronounced that many long-time specialists in the field have quit. "The priority is no longer on prevention," says the FEMA administrator. "Mitigation, honestly, is the orphaned stepchild. People are leaving it in droves."

In fact, disaster professionals are leaving many parts of FEMA in droves, compromising the agency's ability to do its job. "Since last year, so many people have left who had developed most of our basic programs," Mann says. "A lot of the institutional knowledge is gone. Everyone who was able to retire has left, and then a lot of people have moved to other agencies."

There are at least at least two reasons for the exodus. On the one hand, FEMA, like the rest of the federal government's civil service, is hitting a demographic brick wall. Its staff of veteran managers, most of them baby boomers, is reaching retirement age.

But another factor is at work: disillusionment at the agency's new direction under the Bush administration. In February 2004, the American Federation of Government Employees surveyed 84 FEMA personnel about the state of things at the agency. The results showed a dramatic downturn in morale: 80 percent said FEMA has become "a poorer agency" under DHS, and 60 percent said that, given the chance to move to another agency and make the same salary, they'd do so.

For some, quitting the agency has become an especially attractive option, since FEMA is outsourcing more and many former employees have found work with contractors. It's an understandable choice, Mann says. "They're saying, OK, I can't develop my career here any more, so I might as well cash out."

Not everyone who has left did so because of disenchantment, asserts Laurence Zensinger, a longtime FEMA official who resigned this year and joined Dewberry, a Fairfax, Va.-based engineering firm that does disaster work for the government. Under the DHS reorganization, he says, some of FEMA's capabilities have in fact been strengthened, because the new arrangement aids coordination among federal agencies that FEMA regularly works with. Furthermore, he says, the rise in public and governmental attention to emergency programs since 9/11 has, in a larger sense, benefited the agency. "I think there's a lot that's happening that's sort of lifting all boats," he says.

Nevertheless, FEMA must now get by with a smaller number of in-house specialists. The irony, disaster researcher Claire Rubin says, is that FEMA will now have to hire former employees like Zensinger as contractors. "Now, frankly, the senior brains and the people with 20, 30 years of operational experience, there's more of them in the private sector than there are at FEMA. It's a significant shift. If the government's going to get smaller and the catastrophes keep getting bigger, the net effect will be to outsource what you need. It might be cheaper, it might be more expensive, but it's not a great way to run this part of government." Following the current spate of hurricanes, she predicts, "you will see FEMA contracts flying left and right so they can get these people back who know how to do this stuff."

"An exposed nerve"

In case Congress hasn't gotten the message, former FEMA director James Lee Witt recently restated it in strong terms. "I am extremely concerned that the ability of our nation to prepare for and respond to disasters has been sharply eroded," he testified at a March 24, 2004, hearing on Capitol Hill. "I hear from emergency managers, local and state leaders, and first responders nearly every day that the FEMA they knew and worked well with has now disappeared. In fact one state emergency manager told me, 'It is like a stake has been driven into the heart of emergency management.'"

Lately, though, Witt has had nothing to say publicly about the agency's performance. His disaster management company, James Lee Witt Associates, recently won a $250,000 contract with Orlando, Fla., to help the city get its share of post-hurricane FEMA money. A company spokesman says that Witt will be making no comment while Florida's recovery efforts continue, out of respect for his former colleagues.

Waugh, the Georgia State University expert, says that the recent hurricanes could serve as a wake-up call to highlight FEMA's drift in priorities. "If you talk to FEMA people and emergency management people around the country, people have almost been hoping for a major natural disaster like a hurricane, just to remind DHS and the administration that there are other big things--even bigger things than al Qaeda.

"This is an exposed nerve in the emergency management community, in the sense that resources have been shifted away from hurricanes, tornados and other kinds of disasters--the kind of disasters that are more likely to occur than terrorism."

Jon Elliston is a former Independent *staff writer who specializes in national security issues. This article was funded by the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies and includes reporting by* Folio Weekly *in Jacksonville, Fla., and* Gambit Weekly *in New Orleans, La.*

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