

Hurricane Katrina appears to be headed for the history books as one of the worst national disasters ever to hit the United States. Yet the deeper tragedy is not just how large a toll this storm will eventually take, but how avoidable it all could have been.

The devastation wrought on the Gulf tonight is the result of two terrible disasters. The first was the fury of nature. The other is the unnecessary consequence of this government's inexcusable failure to prepare for the inevitable.

The primary function of a government is to ensure the safety of its citizens. This Congress and this Administration have failed to do so in the most incompetent and willfully negligent way imaginable.

This hurricane was not a surprise. For decades meteorologists, State and local officials, Army engineers, academics, and, yes, FEMA have warned that a Category Four or Five hurricane hitting New Orleans was among the top three most likely major disasters to affect the United States and that we must be prepared. The most recent analysis was conducted just last year, where a computer simulation of the fictional "Hurricane Pam" pounded New Orleans much as Katrina did, pushing the waters of Lake Pontchartrain through the levees flooding the city and stranding 300,000 poor and African-American New Orleanians.

The day before Katrina reached land, FEMA's own director, Michael Brown, raised the possibility of the levees being breached. On August 28th, Brown told CNN that "we knew from experience, based back in the '40s and even in the late 1800s, if a Category Four or Five hurricane were to strike New Orleans just right, the flooding would be devastating. It could be catastrophic." And yet the President said just yesterday that "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees."

Plans to prepare for this catastrophe had been developed at FEMA as early as the 1990s when President Clinton's FEMA Director, James Lee Witt, laid out a plan for coping with a nightmare scenario in New Orleans that included pre-positioning hospital ships and pumps to handle the catastrophe. Why this was not done is just the beginning of the laundry list of problems with the response to this disaster. Command and control has still not been established. There are FEMA personnel on site and they can do nothing as they await instructions from the bureaucracy in Washington. When will someone take control? The Gulf Coast desperately needs a leader to emerge at FEMA who can direct its operation. Why has this taken so long?

Lurking just below the surface is another set of troubling questions: What if this had been a terrorist attack? Is our emergency response capability so weak that a levee breach, or power outages, or debris can incapacitate an entire region? President Bush has pledged repeatedly since 9/11, now over 4 years ago, that he would keep our country safe. Is this the best this Administration can do? Do our citizens not deserve all the protection and support this government can provide?

The reality is that this country is woefully unprepared to respond to a major domestic disaster in this country because FEMA has been systematically dismantled over the past 5 years by incompetent leaders, anti-government ideology, budget cuts, and bureaucratic red tape.

FEMA's current problems essentially began with the creation of the Department of Home-

land Security, which demoted FEMA from cabinet-level status and reduced it to one of 22 organizations under the umbrella of the Secretary of Homeland Security. Next, its mission was reprioritized and its budget cut, taking the emphasis off of responding to natural disasters while the upper ranks of management were filled by patronage hires, five out of eight having had no emergency preparedness experience. At the same time, FEMA's professional staff was becoming increasingly demoralized. By this week, nine out of ten regional director positions were vacant, as were three out of five disaster response director positions. This brain drain left an agency without the proper leadership, resources, or influence in government to cope with a major catastrophe.

Responsibility, however, does not rest solely with the Bush Administration. This Congress has been a willing co-conspirator in the degradation of FEMA's capabilities.

Since 2001, many Federal disaster mitigation programs have fallen to budgetary pressures. FEMA's Project Impact, a model mitigation program, 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.

In 2003, Congress approved a White House proposal to cut FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in half. Previously, the Federal government was committed to investing 15 percent of the recovery costs of a disaster toward mitigating future problems. Under the Bush formula, only 7.5 percent are given. Experts say that such post-disaster mitigation efforts are the best way to minimize future losses.

In 2004 alone, Congress cut FEMA's budget by \$170 million.

And FEMA is not the only agency to feel the effects of budget cuts. Bush's 2005 budget proposal called for a 13 percent reduction in the Army Corps of Engineers' budget, down to \$4 billion from \$4.6 billion in fiscal 2004 and the New Orleans Corp of Engineers was to lose \$71.2 million out of its budget, the largest cut in its history. This is the very agency responsible for the New Orleans levee system. Assistant Secretary of the Army Michael Parker was even fired for accusing the Bush Administration of failing to adequately fund the Corp of Engineers before Katrina struck.

Natural disasters are a fact of life in this country. Hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes are just some of the eventualities that will inevitably occur and need to be dealt with. Over the past decade, FEMA has responded to more than 500 such disasters with varying degrees of effectiveness. But Katrina has provided its first major test since September 11. The repercussions of the failure of that test are staggering.

Going forward, I believe we need to create a bipartisan, national commission, similar to the 9/11 Commission, to provide an objective look at what went wrong and to make recommendations to repair what is clearly a broken system. Doing so is essential to restoring the confidence of the American people in our government's ability to respond to a crisis on American soil and to keep them safe. The people of the Gulf Coast have demanded answers to their questions and we owe them that.

There is also much more to be said about what this catastrophe has to reveal about the

problems of race and class in America. It is in some way illustrative of this Administration's neglect of the less fortunate that those in the worst situations after this storm are the poorest and most disenfranchised populations—precisely the people this Administration's policies have, at best, callously ignored.

But social justice is a conversation for a later time. For now, we must focus on the immediate task at hand. Our duty is to do everything we can for the victims of this disaster and to rebuild the Gulf Coast. We begin tonight with this modest appropriation of \$10.5 billion. Hundreds of billions more are certain to follow. The money will pay for the finest clean up possible, but, in the end, it will not change the reality that things did not have to happen this way.

CONGRATULATING TOM ENGIBOUS

HON. MICHAEL C. BURGESS

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Mr. BURGESS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Mr. Tom Engibous, this year's recipient of the American Electronics Association's Medal of Achievement Award.

Since 1959, the Medal of Achievement has been presented annually for significant contributions to the advancement of the high-tech industry and for distinguished service to the community, the industry and humankind. Mr. Engibous is fortunate enough to join the select group of high-tech leaders who have received this honor by becoming the fifty-first recipient of the coveted award.

Tom Engibous is the chairman, president and chief executive officer of Texas Instruments Incorporated. While serving in previous roles at TI, Mr. Engibous helped transform the company from a broad-based conglomerate to a semiconductor company. His strategic focus and ability to quickly execute on the elements needed to reconfigure the company laid the foundation for the TI of today—a semiconductor leader in signal processing technology that has gained widespread recognition among customers, the financial community and the general public.

I extend my sincere congratulations to Mr. Tom Engibous for receiving the highest award given by the American Electronics Association. His contributions to the technology industry and service to the community should inspire us all.

TRIBUTE TO SIMEON TERRY, NATIONAL MINORITY BUSINESS ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

HON. EDDIE BERNICE JOHNSON

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Ms. EDDIE BERNICE JOHNSON of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to recognize today, Simeon O. Terry, Minority Business Enterprise Program Administrator for Austin Commercial L.P. in Dallas, who received the National Minority Business Advocate Award from the Minority Business Development Agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce on September 12, 2005.