

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

House Resolution 437 directed the Select Committee “to conduct a full and complete investigation” into the “government response to Hurricane Katrina.” The Select Committee worked diligently to meet this mandate, and the Committee’s final report makes an important contribution toward understanding what went wrong. But due to the Committee’s short deadline and the refusal of the White House to provide access to essential documents, key questions remain unanswered. We therefore renew our call for an independent commission to examine the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina.

The Select Committee’s investigation identified scores of problems. The majority report includes more than 90 findings describing critical failures at all levels of government. Some of these problems were obvious. For example, Americans across the country saw for themselves during the televised coverage of the hurricane’s aftermath that “FEMA management lacked situational awareness” and suffered from an “overwhelmed logistics system.” Other problems were discovered during the Committee’s investigation. We agree with many of these findings.

Overall, the majority report is a comprehensive, detailed recitation of the problems that occurred in responding to Hurricane Katrina. It is also a condemnation of the nation’s progress in responding to catastrophic events since 9/11. We concur with the report’s overarching conclusion that the response to Hurricane Katrina was “a national failure, an abdication of the most solemn obligation to provide for the common welfare.” We also agree that Hurricane Katrina was “a failure of leadership.”

For all it accomplished, however, the Select Committee adopted an approach that largely eschews direct accountability. The majority report rarely assesses how these problems occurred, why they were not corrected sooner, and who in particular was responsible. Instead, the report uses the passive voice to describe generic “institutional” failures, general “communications problems,” and vague “bureaucratic inertia.” It seldom holds anyone accountable for these failures.

Extraordinarily serious mistakes were made in the response to Hurricane Katrina, yet only one federal official has lost his job or been held accountable: Michael Brown, the former director of FEMA. We agree that Mr. Brown made grave errors and was unqualified to run FEMA. But Administration officials more senior to Mr. Brown had the primary responsibility after the 9/11 attacks to build a more robust homeland security response system; instead, they emaciated it. They also need to be held to account.

The single biggest flaw in the Select Committee’s investigation is its failure to obtain key documents and testimony from the White House. The Select Committee learned that Michael Brown communicated up to 30 times with President Bush, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, and his deputy Joe

Hagin in the days before, during, and after the storm. The Committee received evidence that Mr. Brown warned the White House that he could not establish command and control; that he informed the White House that the levees failed on the day Katrina struck; and that he asked the White House for urgent help in managing the federal response. No “full and complete” assessment of the federal response to Hurricane Katrina is possible without reviewing these communications and the White House reaction. Yet when the White House refused to provide any of these communications, the Committee rejected our requests to subpoena them, effectively shielding the White House from scrutiny.

The federal agencies involved in the response to the hurricane provided more cooperation with the investigation than the White House. But there are also significant omissions in the documents they provided to the Committee. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, for example, refused to comply with the only subpoena the Committee issued. It is a telling mark of the Select Committee’s deference to the executive branch that we lack even a basic log of the documents withheld by Secretary Rumsfeld and the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services.

The strongest part of the majority report is the assessment of the performance of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. A major hurricane striking the Gulf Coast and New Orleans was one of the top three potential disasters facing the United States. Yet the evidence before the Select Committee shows that Secretary Chertoff was strangely detached in the key days before Katrina hit. He spent Saturday, August 27, at home and traveled on Tuesday, August 30 — the day after Katrina hit — to Atlanta for a bird flu conference. And he had the atrocious judgment to rely on Michael Brown as his “battlefield commander.” The majority report correctly recognizes that Secretary Chertoff fulfilled his responsibilities “late, ineffectively, or not at all.”

The majority report finds that Secretary Chertoff made a series of critical mistakes. According to the report, Secretary Chertoff “should have designated the Principal Federal Official on Saturday, two days prior to landfall”; he should have chosen someone “from the roster of PFOs who had successfully completed the required PFO training, unlike FEMA Director Michael Brown”; and he “should have convened the Interagency Incident Management Group on Saturday.” The report calls his coordination with the Defense Department “not effective” and criticizes “the Secretary’s failure to invoke the National Response Plan – Catastrophic Incident Annex, to clearly and forcefully instruct everyone involved with the federal response to be proactive, anticipate future requirements, develop plans to fulfill them, and execute those plans without waiting for formal requests from overwhelmed state and local response officials.” Reviews by the Government Accountability Office and the White House itself reached similar conclusions.

What the majority report does not do, however, is draw the logical conclusion to its own findings and recommend Secretary Chertoff’s removal from office. Our

judgment, based on a careful review of the record, is that the Department of Homeland Security needs new and more experienced leadership.

The work that the Select Committee has started needs to be completed. Accordingly, we call for an independent commission, modeled after the 9/11 Commission, that will put politics aside and follow the facts wherever they lead. Only by finishing this job will the nation obtain the complete accounting that must precede true reform.

Finally, as representatives and residents of the Gulf Coast regions directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina, we feel compelled to emphasize that this catastrophe is far from over. There may be a tendency to view this Committee's report as the "closure" the nation needs to move on. But this report will not help a resident of New Orleans settle an insurance claim any faster, it will not move a family in Mississippi into a trailer, and it will not assist a worker from Alabama cover a mortgage with no job. There remain urgent and massive problems affecting the Gulf Coast region. Continuing and active engagement by Congress is essential.