

[Next Article in Opinion \(2 of 11\) >](#)

The New York Times

Editorials / Op-Ed

[Skip to article](#)

[NYTimes.com](#)

[Go to a Section](#)

Welcome, [ctzcrank](#) - [Member Center](#) - [Log Out](#)

[▶ TimesSelect](#) FREE 14-DAY TRIAL!

SEARCH

[Editorials/Op-Ed Home](#) [Editorials](#) [Columnists](#) [Contributors](#) [Letters](#) [New York/Region Opinions](#)

Editorial

Actually, It Was FEMA's Job

•

[E-Mail This](#)

- [Printer-Friendly](#)
- [Save Article](#)

Published: October 2, 2005

While the nation is pretty clear that the Federal Emergency Management Agency failed miserably during Hurricane Katrina, people are confused about what it should - or shouldn't - have been doing. That's partly because of the high-decibel blame-shifting that has been going on. Exhibit A was the spectacularly disconnected "not-my-job" display by the former FEMA director, Michael Brown, at a Congressional inquiry last week.

FEMA's job is to coordinate disaster relief, broken into four areas: preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. The key word is coordinate, and Mr. Brown repeated it time and again during his hearing. "FEMA is a coordinating agency. We are not a law enforcement agency," he told lawmakers.

But according to emergency management experts across America, that is no excuse for Mr. Brown's failures. The federal role is to make things happen. That means being in the same room with state and local officials, anticipating and responding to their needs. It means making sure state and local officials get help, quickly. It means focusing on what is actually happening. Let's look at FEMA's mandate to see what should have been done differently, with an eye to doing better in the future:

Preparedness A little over a year ago, FEMA directed federal and state officials to conduct a \$1 million simulation of what a Category 3 hurricane - this one was nicknamed Hurricane Pam - would do if it hit southeast Louisiana. The draft report, finished in December 2004, predicted that floodwaters would surge over levees, creating high casualties and forcing a mass evacuation. It said hundreds of thousands of homes would be destroyed, a half-million people left homeless, and "all 40 medical facilities in the impacted area isolated and useless," according to The Associated Press. Local officials, the report said, would quickly be overwhelmed.

Mr. Brown had the report for several months before Hurricane Katrina. Yet in the days before Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans, with the National Weather Service saying it was a Category 4 storm, then a Category 5, then back to a Category 4, he decided against a wide-scale deployment of FEMA workers. He put small rescue and communications teams along the Gulf Coast. But it was not until Aug. 29, after the storm hit, that Mr. Brown asked the homeland security secretary, Michael Chertoff, to send at least 1,000 federal workers to help with the rescue.

Response At 8:14 a.m. on Aug. 29, shortly after Katrina hit land, the New Orleans office of the National Weather Service issued a flash flood warning that predicted three to eight feet of water from a levee breach along the Industrial Canal at Tennessee Street. That was the flood that quickly submerged much of the Lower Ninth Ward and nearby areas, trapping thousands of people. Shortly after, the 17th Street Canal levee also was breached.

Despite the National Weather Service report, not to mention the Hurricane Pam simulation, it was not until the next day that federal officials in charge of response noticed that levees had been breached. Mr. Chertoff suggested on NBC that news coverage misled him. "I remember on Tuesday morning picking up newspapers, and I saw headlines, 'New Orleans Dodged the Bullet,' " he said.

When the people in charge of responding to natural disasters ignore weather service bulletins, later claiming to have relied on local newspapers to tell them whether a city is flooded, bad things are going to happen. Once again, FEMA was supposed to be coordinating, but officials apparently did not even bother figuring out what they were supposed to be coordinating the response to.

Recovery No one can forget the mostly poor, mostly black refugees in New Orleans begging for help for days from the Superdome and convention center, where they ended up because many did not have the means to leave town. This is one of the points on which Mr. Brown was most eager to blame local authorities, even private citizens. "And while my heart goes out to people on fixed incomes, it is primarily a state and local responsibility. And in my opinion, it's the responsibility of faith-based organizations, of churches and charities and others to help those people," he said in one wildly cynical bit of sworn testimony before the House.

The New Orleans mayor, Ray Nagin, and the former police chief, Edwin Compass, share blame for Katrina's dreadful aftermath. But at the moment of crisis, the buck stops at FEMA. The quality of help that victims of a disaster receive cannot be determined by their location, or their incomes. If Mr. Brown was so dedicated to coordination, he should have been coordinating the effort to get those refugees to safety, not waiting for the church ladies and the Rotarians - who were also flooded out of their homes.

Mitigation It's too soon to judge FEMA on how well it helps Gulf Coast residents rebuild their lives. Its job is to

pull together all the myriad elements of President Bush's program. Whether it does that satisfactorily remains to be seen.

One thing is certain: Mr. Brown's not-my-job strategy is not the answer.

[Next Article in Opinion \(2 of 11\) >](#)

Related Articles

- [Housing for Storm's Evacuees Lagging Far Behind U.S. Goals](#) (September 30, 2005)
- [In One Parish, Divide Over Housing Newcomers](#) (September 28, 2005)
- [In One Parish, Divide Over Housing Newcomers](#) (September 28, 2005)
- [Former FEMA Chief Blames Local Officials for Failures](#) (September 27, 2005)

Inside NYTimes.com



Spitzerism and the Democrats



World of Their Fathers



[Sudanese Rapper Makes Peace](#)



[War Zone Doctor](#)



[Dowd: A Wolfie in Sheep's Clothing](#)

[Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#) [Home](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Search](#) [Corrections](#) [XML](#) [Help](#) [Contact Us](#)
[Work for Us](#) [Site Map](#) [Back to Top](#)