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# Failing to Establish a Unified Command in Louisiana During Hurricane Katrina

Vernon R. Hayes Jr

## **Abstract**

When Hurricane Katrina struck the United States in 2005, unified commands were established in several states under the principles of the Incident Command System (ICS). These unified commands helped to steer relief efforts. In Louisiana, however, a true unified command was never established, leaving mitigation efforts confused, chaotic, and ineffective. This article looks at the general concept of an ICS unified command; the attempt to establish a unified command in Louisiana; and reasons that the command never materialized.

## I. Introduction

The Incident Command System (ICS), developed in California to manage interagency efforts at fighting fires, was adopted by the federal government as the management system to be utilized at all levels of government—federal, state, and local—in mitigating all disasters. The system, and in particular, its unified command, was designed to make disaster response a team effort, to maximize effort and minimize duplication and waste.

Hurricane Katrina was arguably the largest natural disaster to strike the United States in at least a century.<sup>1</sup> Hitting four states (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana) with minimal warning, government agencies would have been taxed to capacity in the best of circumstances. In of these states, government officials at all levels managed to join forces into the unified commands needed to implement ICS, and succeeded at varying levels of success in improving response efforts. In Louisiana, however, incompetence, ignorance, and lack of cooperation served to magnify the suffering of those people government were supposed to serve and help.

This article will briefly examine the Incident Command System, and its failure in Louisiana. Part II will review the history of efforts to establish a unified command under ICS in Louisiana, and Part III will try to explain some of the reasons that factor into the failures that led to the collapse of efforts of government agencies and their officials to work together effectively at a team.

## II. A History of the Unified Command in Louisiana During Katrina

On 27 August 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco asked President George W. Bush to issue a declaration of a federal state of emergency in advance of Hurricane Katrina making landfall within the next two days (Banks, 2011, p. 67). Bush complied,<sup>2</sup> and as required under the Stafford Act, named FEMA's William Lokey as the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for Louisiana (HSGAC, 2006, p. 561). Despite Bush's declaration, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) failed to declare the expected event as an Incident of National Significance (INS) until 30 August 2005, a day after the hurricane struck

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<sup>1</sup> Katrina was the deadliest hurricane to strike the nation in at least 77 years, and “ranks as the third deadliest hurricane in the United States since 1900” (Knabb, Rhome, & Brown, 2005, p. 11). At least 1,800 people were killed by the storm (*Ibid.*, p. 11), including 1,100 in Louisiana (House Select Committee, 2006, p. 74). A preliminary estimate found property damages to be approximately \$81 billion, with only one-half of that amount covered by insurance (Knabb, Rhome, & Brown, 2005, p. 12).

<sup>2</sup> “Only once in recent history—before Hurricane Floyd in 1999—had a president issued an emergency declaration before a storm made landfall” (Bush, 2010, p. 114).

the Gulf Coast (Banks, 2011, p. 67).<sup>3</sup> At this point, DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff appointed FEMA Director Michael Brown as the Principal Federal Officer (PFO) (*Ibid.*, p. 67).

FEMA's FCO Lokey traveled to Baton Rouge on 27 August 2005, at least thirty-six hours before Katrina made landfall (Lokey, 2005, pp. 3-4). The agency's Emergency Response Team-National (ERT-N) also made it to the state prior to Katrina's arrival (OIG, 2006, p. 20).

Upon his arrival, Lokey met with his counterpart, the State Coordinating Officer (SCO), Colonel Jeff Smith of the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (Lokey, 2005, p. 4). Under the unified command structure, Lokey and Smith "[were] to make collective decisions about the priorities and plans in responding to the disaster" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 561). According to Lokey (2005), "my first priority was to work with Jeff Smith to identify the State's priorities" (p. 4).

The State was heavily involved in the ongoing evacuation efforts but did begin working with us on such issues as search and rescue, commodity distribution, and medical needs. We worked late into the night and began again early on Sunday morning. (*Ibid.*, p. 4).

The Office of Inspector General later determined that, despite this early start, "FEMA's FCO and Louisiana's State Coordinating Officer did not establish joint priorities and objectives for the response until 11 September 2005" (OIG, 2006, p. 21). Moreover, these goals were only put together in a joint Incident Action Plan (IAP) on 14 September (HSGAC, 2006, p. 562).

The FEMA staff, meanwhile, "attempted to integrate with Louisiana's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness personnel" (*Ibid.*, p. 20), and immediately encountered problems when they arrived at the state's Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

[E]xtremely limited space at Louisiana's EOC prevented some FEMA and state personnel from co-locating. Instead, FEMA established an interim operating facility at a separate location, where most FEMA personnel operated until the [Joint Field Office] was established on 12 September 2005. (*Ibid.*, pp. 20-1).

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<sup>3</sup> "Even then, [DHS Secretary Michael] Chertoff declined to trigger the National Response Framework-Catastrophic Incident Annex (NRP-CIA), which would have redirected the federal response posture to a proactive mode of operations" (Banks, 2011, p. 67).

Even after the JFO's establishment, however, "state operations personnel continued working at the state EOC rather than co-locating with FEMA at the JFO" (*Ibid.*, p. 21).

While FEMA's ERT-N attempted to organize under ICS structure principles, staffing problems hampered efforts. From a federal perspective, Lokey told Senate investigators that only one-half of the 25-member ERT-N was in place before Katrina made landfall on Monday morning (HSGAC, 2006, p. 563).<sup>4</sup> In addition, the FEMA staff member in charge of writing a daily Incident Action Plan (IAP), "a fundamental requirement of NIMS-ICS and integral to an effective unified command" did not show up in Baton Rouge until after Katrina hit Louisiana (*Ibid.*, p. 563).

The state response was even more troubled, as Louisiana lacked enough sufficiently trained emergency staff to "support the needed ICS structure" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 563), and therefore "was not able to provide a counterpart to all federal positions" (OIG, 2006, p. 21).

FEMA officials in Louisiana told us that state emergency management personnel were concerned exclusively with evacuations and did not assign staff to work with FEMA to plan initial response efforts for Louisiana. (*Ibid.*, p. 21).

As a result, "the commitment even to attend Unified Command meetings was simply not there" (FEMA, 2006, p. 23), and state officials did not show up for command meetings (*Ibid.*, p. 23).

Moreover, state and local officials lacked basic knowledge about the Incident Command System. One anonymous aide to Governor Blanco later told a reporter, "we don't know necessarily what [is a] 'unified' command, or what do these words mean" (Hsu, Warrick, & Stein, 2005, para. 18). Colonel Smith, the unified command's Louisiana leader, provided the governor and her chief of staff, Andrew Kopplin, a briefing on ICS (and the overall National Response Plan) on 31 August 2005, two days after Katrina made landfall (*Ibid.*, para. 16). On that same day, consultants provided "basic ICS courses to [Louisiana] EOC participants and members of the Louisiana National Guard" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 562).

As [FEMA Deputy FCO Scott] Wells put it: "Two days after the storm hit [Louisiana emergency-management staff] had a consultant come in and show them ICS, explain ICS. In the middle of a catastrophic

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<sup>4</sup> "An internal after-action review by FEMA after Katrina estimated that the ERT team had only 25 percent of the needed staff" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 563).

disaster. This is how ICS works.... They didn't understand it...."  
(*Ibid.*, pp. 562-3).

On 29 August 2005, FEMA Director Brown told DHS Secretary Chertoff and other White House officials, "I am having a horrible time.... I can't get a unified command established" (Kirkpatrick & Shane, 2005, para. 3).

Upon learning of Chertoff's INS declaration on 30 August 2005, the Department of Defense established Joint Task Force Katrina "to coordinate the federal military response to the storm" (Banks, 2011, p. 68). Lieutenant General Russel L. Honoré was given command of the Joint Task Force (Moynihan, 2007, p. 22). It was later found that "the task force took local government requests and pursued actions without coordinating with the Joint Field Office" (*Ibid.*, p. 22).<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the widespread destruction of emergency infrastructure throughout the state, and particularly in New Orleans, "a forward operational area was not established in New Orleans until 5 September 2005" (OIG, 2006, p. 21). This area field office then "received its actions plans and operations from Baton Rouge rather than determining the needs for the area and sending requests for assistance through the JFO" (*Ibid.*, p. 21).

After mounting criticism of FEMA's response to Hurricane Katrina, particularly in Louisiana, FEMA Director Brown's role as PFO was given to Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen on 09 September 2005 (MSNBC, 2005). Brown subsequently resigned as FEMA director on 12 September 2005, and was replaced by David Paulison (CNN, 2005). On 21 September 2005, President Bush named PFO Allen as the FCO for all states affected by Katrina (Carwile, 2005, p. 10).

### III. Why Attempts at a Unified Command Failed

The inability of a unified command to be established in Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina is universally recognized by most individuals and agencies investigating the failed federal, state and local response to the disaster. As the House Select Committee formed to look into the response stated, "there were lapses in command and control within each level of government, and between the three levels of government" (House Select Committee, 2006, p. 183). More importantly,

The lack of effective command and control, and its impact on unity of command, degraded the relief efforts. Delays and otherwise poor

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<sup>5</sup> "The DoD views that it cannot be put under any civilian command other than the president and the secretary of the DoD, and that any assignments it provides to other agencies are voluntary responses to requests rather than orders from a higher command" (Moynihan, 2007, pp. 22-3).

assistance efforts caused by a lack of command and control are documented in [this report]. (*Ibid.*, p. 183).

This failure, however, was not preordained. The Incident Command System was over thirty years old by the time Katrina made landfall, and was by federal law the mandated structure of disaster relief efforts. Why, then, was it impossible to establish the command? Among many reasons given, research shows it can be attributed to five elements: Scarce physical space, inadequate staffing levels, insufficient training, bypassed command structure, and unfinished planning.

**Scarce physical space.** The inadequate size of Louisiana's EOC made it impossible for proper co-location of federal and state officials to operate as a unified command. When attempts were made to hold meetings, the results were "hundreds of people trying to cram into a 50-person meeting room" (Moynihan, 2007, p. 19).<sup>6</sup> With most FEMA personnel eventually stationed at an alternative location, it was difficult (if not impossible) for federal and state workers to physically confer and work together.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this initial separation allowed some state employees to ignore integration of efforts even after the JFO was opened on 12 September 2005.

**Inadequate staffing levels.** The establishment of a unified command was made impossible by a shortage of staff both on the federal and state levels. To compensate for budget contractions, "FEMA responded to budget shortfalls with an old administrative trick: They failed to fill vacancies" (Moynihan, 2007, p. 26). This led to an "agency-wide vacancy rate of 15 to 20 percent, and more in some areas" (*Ibid.*, p. 26).<sup>8</sup> As a result, "in Louisiana, FEMA officials could meet only about half of their responsibilities" (Barr, 2006, para. 5).<sup>9</sup> This lack of sufficient FEMA manpower was made more acute by the failure of one-half of the ERT-N to arrive in Baton Rouge before the hurricane made landfall.

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<sup>6</sup> According to FEMA's Lokey, "we had much better communication and coordination among everybody when we could [get everybody around the table], because the State EOC was very crowded and we had a lot of our staff meetings in the hallways" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 563).

<sup>7</sup> "...[A] few FEMA Operations Section personnel continued to work out of the [Louisiana] EOC to facilitate and pre-screen Louisiana's requests for assistance until state operations personnel moved to the JFO" (OIG, 2006, p. 21).

<sup>8</sup> "FEMA judged only 27 of [its] 52 [Disaster Medical Assistance Teams] to be operational at the time of Katrina, and lacked resources or plans to train or equip these teams. In the area of search and rescue, FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue Teams lacked the plans, funds, personnel, and equipment to respond to a catastrophe" (Moynihan, 2007, p. 27).

<sup>9</sup> "Scott Wells, the deputy federal coordinating official for the state, said: 'We did not have the people. We did not have the expertise. We did not have the operational training folks that we needed to do our mission'" (Barr, 2006, para. 5).

With a staff of approximately 45 people (HSGAC, 2006, p. 563),<sup>10</sup> Louisiana's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (LOHSEP) was also too small to handle the demands of a major disaster. FEMA, in fact, argues that unified command's main problem "was the state's lack of emergency-management capacity" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 561). According to "an internal staff study," the department had "only about 60 percent of the staffing capacity of peer organizations in other states" (Moynihan, 2007, p. 29). Recommendations for more staff were made, but they "were not funded by the state legislature" (*Ibid.*, p. 29). As with FEMA, the state's understaffing led to immediate problems.

After landfall, LOHSEP had primary responsibility for establishing an Emergency Operations Center to channel the state and federal response. However, LOHSEP could provide the EOC only 40 full-time trained staff, or 20 per 12-hour shift. To supplement this staff, LOHSEP relied on National Guard personnel to staff the EOC, many of who were inadequately trained for the task (House Report 2006, p. 192). (*Ibid.*, p. 29).

**Insufficient training.** Exacerbating Louisiana's staffing shortage was its failure to train and familiarize its personnel with the National Response Plan and the Incident Command System. In fact, according to a special report of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "perhaps the most significant reason for the failure to establish unified command in Louisiana [was] the lack of NIMS and NRP training" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 562).

Prior to Hurricane Katrina's arrival, "only about 15 of those on [Louisiana's state] staff had emergency management experience" (Moynihan, 2007, p. 29). The desperate attempt to train staff members, including the governor and her chief of state, on NRP and ICS *four days after* FCO Lokey and ERT-N arrived in Baton Rouge, perhaps defines why it was impossible to establish a working unified command in the state. As Deputy FCO Wells told Senate interviewers,

The states agreed to use NIMS. They agreed to ICS. What does it tell you when two days into a catastrophic disaster, a state gets somebody in to explain ICS to them? (HSGAC, 2006, p. 562).

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<sup>10</sup> "'Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness is a small organization, 44, 47 people,' Tony Robinson, FEMA's Deputy FCO for Special Projects, explained" (HSGAC, 2006, p. 563).



Wells later said, “If people don’t understand ICS, we can’t do ICS. And if we can’t do ICS, we cannot manage disasters’ (House Report 2006, p. 193)” (Moynihan, 2007, p. 23).

Training problems were not limited to the state. As Moynihan (2007) points out, the TOPOFF 3 disaster exercise of April 2005 “revealed ‘a fundamental lack of understanding for the principles and protocols set forth in the NRP and NIMS’ at all levels of government” (p. 23).<sup>11</sup>

**Bypassed command structure.** Despite the presence of the unified command, both federal and state officials often ignored its coordination and communications efforts and instead directly communicated with each other. As a result, “many requests for assistance were addressed outside of the unified command structure” (HSGAC, 2006, p. 561).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as people communicated outside of the command structure, the perceived need for a centralized source of authority continued to dwindle, thereby negating any sense of urgency to establish a fully functional unified command.

Colonel Smith, for example, testified that FEMA Director (and PFO) Brown “went operational and began directing and guiding response operations and to a large degree left out the Federal Coordinating Officer (“FCO”) who, by doctrine, is the individual that is supposed to be in charge of response operations” (House Select Committee, 2005, p. 16).<sup>13</sup> In addition, as was previously discussed, the Defense Department’s Joint Task Force Katrina “took local government requests and pursued actions without coordinating with the [unified command’s] Joint Field Office” (Moynihan, 2007, p. 22).

Many state, federal, and local officials “were ‘freelancing,’ or just showing up without coordinating with the appropriate authorities at FEMA or the state. They would bypass the command structure” (House Report 2006, p. 189). (*Ibid.*, p. 22).

Louisiana’s SCO, Colonel Smith, contends that, with his shared command with FCO Lokey, PFO Brown’s operational cell office, and General Honoré’s own independent operations through military channels, “in essence, in Katrina,

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<sup>11</sup> “The TOPOFF 3 exercise took place April 4-8, 2005, and simulated a large-scale terrorist attack involving biological and chemical weapons” (Moynihan, 2007, p. 23).

<sup>12</sup> “Because the chain of command was dysfunctional, responders at all levels attempted to conduct their missions to the best of their ability, often outside of the chain of command” (FEMA, 2006, p. 24).

<sup>13</sup> “The PFO cell was operating on its own, communicating directly with the Governor, communicating directly with the Mayor of New Orleans and a myriad of other local elected officials” (House Select Committee, 2005, p. 16).

there were three (3) Federal commands, not one, unified command” (House Select Committee, 2005, p. 16).<sup>14</sup>

While FCO Lokey failed to find several military requests that were not relayed through the JFO as “inappropriate, he was frustrated that, overall, many request for assistance did not go through the unified command and thought this impaired the response to Katrina” (HSGAC, 2006, p. 562).

**Unfinished planning.** As FEMA’s FCO for Mississippi, William Carwile, has written, “the joint [command’s] Incident Action Plan is the engine that drives the response/recovery effort” (Carwile, 2005, p. 6). Both Lokey and Smith recognized the importance of establishing a plan, and began working on identifying joint priorities before Katrina made landfall. However, as conditions in the state—and between federal and state officials—deteriorated, such planning fell by the wayside. As a result, a plan containing the joint priorities and objectives was only finished on 14 September 2005, *eighteen days after* Lokey and Smith began the process (HSGAC, 2006, p. 562).

This “lack of a common operational picture added to the impediments” faced by responders throughout the state (FEMA, 2006, p. 24). As a result, officials stopped using the unified command, and instead began to contact agencies and departments directly.

At times, local responders and government representatives requested assistance directly from FEMA, and similarly, FEMA representatives worked directly with Parishes to accomplish missions. These efforts, while well-meaning, resulted in overlapping management, which ultimately contributed to confusion and limiting effective work by all personnel. (FEMA, 2006, p. 24).

The failure of the unified command to establish priorities and develop a plan directly led to its further marginalization in response efforts throughout Louisiana.

#### IV. Conclusion

Despite millions of dollars and years of training and preparation, the failure of government agencies to work together in bringing relief to the people of Louisiana only served to make an already catastrophic nightmare even more tragic. Considering the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, all blame cannot be pinned on the incompetent efforts of the government. As Moynihan (2007) points out,

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<sup>14</sup> “NIMS calls for a unified command where all entities work together. In this case, anyone who was there, anyone who chose to look, would realize that there were literally three separate Federal commands” (House Select Committee, 2005, p. 16).

“good management might modify natural disasters, but cannot eliminate them” (p. 18). But at the end of the day, the public demands value for its tax dollars, and was rightfully angry at the results offered by government in Louisiana. Hopefully, the subsequent investigations, and analysis of what happened—and why—can help to mitigate the next disaster to strike the United States.

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