



SACRAMENTO STATE – Department Of Public Policy & Administration

Case Study Excerpt Adapted From:

Collaboration Amid Crisis: The Department of Defense During Hurricane Katrina

by Donald P. Moynihan

University of Madison-Wisconsin

Background: Hurricane Katrina

By Friday, August 26 at 11 a.m., the National Weather Service warned that Hurricane Katrina was heading toward New Orleans. The Governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, was worried enough to declare a state of emergency. Later, the National Weather Service revised its prediction. By 4 p.m. the storm was predicted to hit the Mississippi Coast. By 4 a.m. on Saturday New Orleans was again expected to be hit. On Saturday voluntary evacuations began in Louisiana, President Bush declared a state of emergency and FEMA and state emergency responders began 24-hour operations. By 7 p.m. on Saturday, the National Weather Service warned that levees could be topped in New Orleans, causing catastrophic flooding.

The Mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, ordered a mandatory evacuation by 9:30 a.m. on Sunday, and the Superdome was opened as a refuge of last resort. Katrina made landfall by 6:10 a.m. on Monday, and later that morning levees began to be overtopped and breached, leading to catastrophic flooding, although the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and White House would not learn of this until early Tuesday morning. Search and rescue operations began by Monday afternoon, but communications also began to fail around this time. DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff declared an Incident of National Significance on Tuesday evening. On Thursday, buses finally arrived to begin evacuations from the Superdome, although evacuations from both the Superdome and another shelter, the Morial Convention Center, were not completed until Saturday, and some remained stranded on highways until Monday.

Coordinating Crisis Response

The US government has struggled with how to deal with the challenge of fostering inter-organizational collaboration amid crisis. The aftermath of 9/11 saw the newly created DHS mandate a single model for crisis response coordination. This model was the Incident Command System (ICS). The ICS was an innovation of California forest fire responders in the early 1970s, who sought to find a common language, management concepts, and communications to facilitate coordination. The key innovation of the ICS was to temporarily centralize authority to direct multiple organizations. The designated incident commander directs and coordinates the tactical efforts of the many organizations using standard crisis response functions of operations, logistics, planning, and finance and administration.

In 2004, the DHS established a new National Response Plan (NRP) that included a requirement for all federal responders to use the ICS approach, as well as any state and local responders receiving DHS grants. Katrina was the first major disaster that took place after the introduction of the new

crisis management policies, and represented their first critical test. But the ICS failed to provide unity of command and clear direction to responders during Katrina. No single individual took charge in the early stages of the disaster. There were three major operational commands in the field during Katrina featuring federal officials:

- The Joint Field Office and Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO): The NRP makes the FCO (William Lokey, from FEMA) the federal response commander. The FCO forms a unified command with the state coordinating officer, who is responsible for coordinating state and local needs and actions with federal actions. According to the classic ICS model the Joint Field Office is the commanding unit. But in the case of Katrina, two other commands existed.
- The Principal Federal Official (PFO): The NRP created the role of the PFO to act as the eyes and ears of the DHS on the ground, but not to make operational decisions. Secretary Chertoff appointed Michael Brown as the PFO on Tuesday, the day after landfall. But Brown lacked the required training for the role, and thought the role was an unnecessary distraction from his duties. Brown did such a poor job of communicating with Chertoff that the DHS Secretary eventually told him to stop moving and to stay put in Baton Rouge. There was confusion in the minds of DHS officials as to the role of the PFO. Some seemed to think that it was effectively the role of field commander, trumping the FCO. In a pre-Katrina response exercise this confusion had been apparent, but was unresolved. The PFO that succeeded Brown, Admiral Thad Allen, did not clear this confusion, but instead established a separate command that made operational decisions without working through the Joint Field Office. In practical terms, this tension was finally resolved when Allen also took on the role of FCO.
- Joint Task Force Katrina: This command directed DOD active duty forces. General Honoré, who led the Joint Task Force, took state and local government requests and pursued actions without coordinating with the Joint Field Office.

The DOD View of Crisis Response

For federal agencies, the NRP had identified specific disaster responsibilities ahead of time in order to reduce confusion when a crisis occurred. The DHS hoped that this would establish a basis for crisis collaboration. FEMA would identify a need and communicate it to the appropriate federal agencies, who would then supply the requested resources. Reflecting its outsized importance, the DOD had responsibilities in almost all of the emergency support functions identified by the NRP.

But this process is complicated by the DOD's understanding of its role in crisis response. DOD has its own directives that reflect a reluctance to become engaged in crisis response, and particular concerns about interagency collaboration. This policy decrees that the DOD will become involved "only when other local, state or Federal resources are unavailable and only if Defense support does not interfere with DOD's primary mission or ability to respond to operational contingencies." The official stance of the DOD is that it cannot be part of any incident command not under the control of DOD officials, arguing that, alone among federal agencies, it cannot be commanded by any civilian other than the President and the Secretary of the DOD.

Within these constraints, the DOD offers two forms of crisis response capacity. First, when necessary, the DOD is willing to provide help to civilian authorities, but views mission assignments from these agencies as requests for assistance rather than orders from a command. The DOD facilitates this coordination by placing a Defense Coordinating Officer to work with the Federal Coordinating Officer at the Joint Field Office of the incident. The Defense Coordinating Office is the on-site command of DOD resources unless a separate command is established. Second, if serious

enough, the military may decide to establish a separate command to direct its own forces. In Katrina, this took the form of Joint Task Force Katrina, led by General Russel L. Honoré.

The DOD's caution about its role in crisis response reflects an underlying concern about being dragged into non-military missions and becoming subservient to other organizations. This concern is not new. In his classic analysis of civil-military relations, Samuel Huntington argued that the DOD sought and needed a measure of autonomy. In return, the military would maintain an ethic of professionalism that emphasized obedience to a civilian command.

The DOD during Katrina

Many responders, including some DOD officials, suggested that the DOD response to Katrina was sluggish. Other DOD officials defended their response, noting that they had set aside bureaucratic rules. Both characterizations are accurate to the extent that they reflect two distinct stages of the DOD's response. In the first period, before and immediately after landfall, the DOD took an essentially reactive posture, where it waited for requests from civilian authorities. In the second period, beginning on Tuesday, the day after landfall, the DOD took a much more proactive stance, characterized by a "can-do" military culture that led the DOD to set aside its own rules and procedures in the name of greater effectiveness.

Period One: "Why Isn't the Red Tape Being Cut?"

Both FEMA officials and Louisiana state officials described the initial DOD response as slow and overly bureaucratic. Scott Wells, a FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer with 30 years of military experience, described the JDOMS process as "more than awkward. It's more than cumbersome. It just takes a long time to execute."

FEMA staff were frustrated by cases where the DOD could have been more responsive in processing requests. It took 24 hours for the DOD to process orders for helicopters to survey the damage. FEMA requested eight swiftwater rescue teams, squads trained and equipped to work in a flooded city, and equipment from Travis and March Air Force bases in California. While FEMA liaisons worked all night drawing up the request, they were told in the morning that Secretary Rumsfeld was unavailable to approve the request (Rumsfeld was in San Diego, his schedule including a San Diego Padres baseball game). At one point, when told Pentagon rules did not allow for the quick procurement of a boat to house the homeless, FEMA Director Michael Brown asked: "Why isn't red tape being cut?"

State government officials encountered similar red tape. Andy Kopplin, Chief of Staff to Louisiana Governor Blanco, requested that the Pentagon allow the use of four helicopters that were at the Fort Polk Air Force Base in Louisiana. On Tuesday morning, Kopplin called the base and was told the Governor needed to make a request to the DOD to release the helicopters. After spending hours on the phone to an official at the Pentagon, permission was given. But then the helicopters were not released until the next day. Because pilots had spent the day idling on the tarmac awaiting orders, they had exceeded their allowed flight time for the day and were not allowed to fly.

The DOD argued that most delays in processing requests for aid were because of vague FEMA requests. From the perspective of FEMA officials working under difficult conditions, the DOD demanded an excessive level of detail, creating an information bar unlikely to be satisfied in the chaos of Katrina. Scott Wells suggested that the DOD wanted "to know 80 to 90 percent of the information before they will commit an asset." Once the DOD reviewed a request, it often returned it to FEMA seeking additional clarification.

General Honoré had also urged a more proactive approach. On Sunday evening he contacted NORTHCOM, requesting a consideration of what types of support could be provided, and sought a response by 2 a.m. the next morning. However, without direction to deploy resources from JDOMS, NORTHCOM was reluctant to explore options, delaying the ability of the DOD to become an active participant in the response. Major General Richard Rowe, the Operations Director at NORTHCOM, noted that “Joint Forces Command and the Joint Staff did not do anything,” and did not want to see any requests initiated from within the military until FEMA had issued requests. This approach hampered Rowe’s ability to detail the types of support the DOD could immediately provide. In an email to Honoré 12 hours after landfall Rowe explained the delay in providing this information was due to being “somewhat hamstrung by JDOMS desire to wait for [Requests for Assistance].”

Period Two: The Blank Check

Like other federal officials not in Louisiana, DOD leadership assumed that New Orleans had “dodged a bullet” as late as Monday night. On Tuesday morning Assistant Secretary Paul McHale, Deputy Secretary Gordon England (who was acting Secretary in Rumsfeld’s absence), and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, met. They were concerned that media reports were underreporting damage, and that FEMA was not making requests in a timely fashion. Deputy Secretary England told the Joint Chiefs of Staff and representatives of the military services that they should “lean forward” and that NORTHCOM was to be provided with any asset it needed. On Tuesday afternoon, General Myers repeated these commitments to his service chiefs, adding that they could proceed on the authority of vocal command, from himself, or from Deputy Secretary England to provide the necessary resources needed to Admiral Timothy Keating, commander of NORTHCOM. Keating was told by England that he had a “blank check” to respond to Katrina. A later order provided further autonomy to DOD responders, expanding Myers vocal order to allow commanders to react anywhere they saw a need.

These leaders at the DOD anticipated that the full attention of the White House was now turned to Katrina, and as a result, their role would be significantly broadened. Admiral Ed Giambastiani, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff emailed Admiral Keating at 4.59 p.m. on Tuesday saying: “Whatever you can think of and get it moving yesterday, carriers, helos, trucks, amphib, LCACs [Landing Craft Air Cushion], C-17s, C-130s, hospital ships, medical teams - whatever. Overkill is better than undershoot. POTUS [President Bush] is coming back to D.C. tonight just for this.”

The switch to a proactive response was felt immediately on the ground. Captain McDaniel noted “The pendulum swung from one extreme to the other through this. I mean, it went from having to pry Secretary Rumsfeld’s fingers off of a helicopter package...and this 100-pound gorilla just goes, ‘Okay, we’ve got it.’ Boom, and then the floodgates open.” This new responsiveness led FEMA and DHS staff to praise the DOD. DHS Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson described it as “one of the best examples of cutting through bureaucratic red tape and getting on with the job.”

The DOD no longer allocated resources by carefully vetting FEMA requests. If requests were not specific enough, DOD officials were now likely to fill in the details and move ahead. In addition, the DOD sought to anticipate FEMA requests by moving forward with what resources it thought appropriate. When FEMA requested resources, the DOD was ready to provide them. If the DOD felt that resources could be usefully deployed, but FEMA had not already requested those resources, the DOD generally put them in operation anyway, and then drafted its own requests for assistance, which it passed on to FEMA to send back to the DOD through official channels. For example, US

Transportation Command began airlifts from New Orleans airport at 8 a.m. on Thursday, but it was not until Thursday evening that the DOD received a mission assignment to airlift evacuees, and this assignment was not processed until Friday. The majority of military resources deployed, worth about \$805 million, were already in the process of execution by the time they were officially approved by the Secretary of Defense on September 5.

JDOMS directives allow local military commanders to make use of resources without prior permission to “save lives, prevent human suffering, or mitigate great property damage under imminently serious conditions.” Honoré, in many instances, replaced the JDOMS process – taking requests for state and local officials, evaluating them, and deploying resources. For example, Louisiana officials did not make a formal request for active duty forces to be deployed but simply asked Honoré. Active duty personnel searched for survivors, assisted rescues, and maintained law and order.

The DOD was now clearly engaged in the response. This was good news for FEMA; having witnessed DOD’s concerns about performing non-military missions and FEMA was now seeing the “can-do” aspect of DOD culture. But it did not mean that FEMA and the DOD now had a smooth collaborative relationship. By committing to an all-out effort, the DOD largely edged FEMA aside, telling FEMA what resources it would provide before FEMA could formulate requests. In his testimony to the Senate, Scott Wells of FEMA likened the aid of the DOD to that of an 800-pound gorilla: “You’re supposed to take care of that gorilla and be responsible for that gorilla, but that 800-pound gorilla is going to do what he wants to do when he wants to do it and how he wants to do it. So you lose some of that control in your organization with the Department of Defense structure.”

The establishment of Joint Task Force Katrina reflected DOD autonomy. The Task Force essentially represented a separate field command in addition to the civilian Joint Field Office, and the Principal Federal Official. The Task Force did little to coordinate the requests it received from state and local officials with other commands. This further weakened the prospect for unified command in response. For example, FEMA officials had devised a plan for evacuating the Superdome, and planned to do so on Wednesday morning. But General Honoré told National Guard at the Superdome to cancel these plans. At the request of Governor Blanco, Honoré implemented a separate evacuation plan without informing FEMA. Another example is body recovery and mortuary services, where the DOD became impatient when the Department of Health and Human Services, the official lead agency for this responsibility, was slow in responding. Eventually, the DOD took the lead in identifying and storing the dead bodies. In these examples, the DOD simply moved ahead and undertook tasks when it felt that coordinating with other agencies was delaying the process.

The aggressive response of the DOD in this period made it easy to forget its initial inertia. It was widely praised in the aftermath of Katrina. A special Senate committee highlighted the extraordinary efforts of the DOD in helping to restore some sense of order, but also noted “„a cultural reluctance“ to commit Department assets to civil support missions unless absolutely necessary.” This combination of praise and criticism reflected the mixed results of the FEMA-DOD collaboration, and raised questions. Is it possible to structure collaboration in crisis situations? What barriers limit such collaboration, and how can they be overcome? What motivates coordination between agencies? What role do organizational rules, culture, and leadership have in shaping collaboration? Finding answers to these questions poses an ongoing challenge for policymakers looking to unlock the benefits of a crisis response that coordinates the range of capacities of the federal government and other responders, but does so with the rapidity demanded by crisis conditions.