

A Can't-Do Government

By PAUL KRUGMAN
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Before 9/11 the Federal Emergency Management Agency listed the three most likely catastrophic disasters facing America: a terrorist attack on New York, a major earthquake in San Francisco and a hurricane strike on New Orleans. "The New Orleans hurricane scenario," The Houston Chronicle wrote in December 2001, "may be the deadliest of all." It described a potential catastrophe very much like the one now happening.

So why were New Orleans and the nation so unprepared?

After 9/11, hard questions were deferred in the name of national unity, then buried under a thick coat of whitewash. This time, we need accountability.

First question: Why have aid and security taken so long to arrive? Katrina hit five days ago - and it was already clear by last Friday that Katrina could do immense damage along the Gulf Coast. Yet the response you'd expect from an advanced country never happened. Thousands of Americans are dead or dying, not because they refused to evacuate, but because they were too poor or too sick to get out without help - and help wasn't provided. Many have yet to receive any help at all.

There will and should be many questions about the response of state and local governments; in particular, couldn't they have done more to help the poor and sick escape? But the evidence points, above all, to a stunning lack of both preparation and urgency in the federal government's response.

Even military resources in the right place weren't ordered into action. "On Wednesday," said an editorial in The Sun Herald in Biloxi, Miss., "reporters listening to horrific stories of death and survival at the Biloxi Junior High School shelter looked north across Irish Hill Road and saw Air Force personnel playing basketball and performing calisthenics. Playing basketball and performing calisthenics!"

Maybe administration officials believed that the local National Guard could keep order and deliver relief. But many members of the National Guard and much of its equipment - including high-water vehicles - are in Iraq.

"The National Guard needs that equipment back home to support the homeland security mission," a Louisiana Guard officer told reporters several weeks ago.

Second question: Why wasn't more preventive action taken? After 2003 the Army Corps of Engineers sharply slowed its flood-control work, including work on sinking levees. "The corps," an Editor and Publisher article says, citing a series of articles in The Times-Picayune in New Orleans, "never tried to hide the fact that the spending pressures of the war in Iraq, as well as homeland security - coming at the same time as federal tax cuts - was the reason for the strain."

In 2002 the corps' chief resigned, reportedly under threat of being

fired, after he criticized the administration's proposed cuts in the corps' budget, including flood-control spending.

Third question: Did the Bush administration destroy FEMA's effectiveness? The administration has, by all accounts, treated the emergency management agency like an unwanted stepchild, leading to a mass exodus of experienced professionals.

Last year James Lee Witt, who won bipartisan praise for his leadership of the agency during the Clinton years, said at a Congressional hearing: "I am extremely concerned that the ability of our nation to prepare for and respond to disasters has been sharply eroded. I hear from emergency managers, local and state leaders, and first responders nearly every day that the FEMA they knew and worked well with has now disappeared."

I don't think this is a simple tale of incompetence. The reason the military wasn't rushed in to help along the Gulf Coast is, I believe, the same reason nothing was done to stop looting after the fall of Baghdad. Flood control was neglected for the same reason our troops in Iraq didn't get adequate armor.

At a fundamental level, I'd argue, our current leaders just aren't serious about some of the essential functions of government. They like waging war, but they don't like providing security, rescuing those in need or spending on preventive measures. And they never, ever ask for shared sacrifice.

Yesterday Mr. Bush made an utterly fantastic claim: that nobody expected the breach of the levees. In fact, there had been repeated warnings about exactly that risk.

So America, once famous for its can-do attitude, now has a can't-do government that makes excuses instead of doing its job. And while it makes those excuses, Americans are dying.