

Oh, what a difference six years can make. Almost to the exact date six years ago Hurricane Katrina roared up the Gulf of Mexico and into the greater New Orleans area. As I write this article from Washington, DC, Hurricane Irene is coming north with a vengeance. Katrina was a Category 5 but Irene has leveled to a Category 1. However, Irene dwarfs Katrina in size. This monster is as large as continental Europe and is wreaking havoc from South Carolina all the way to Maine. Twenty percent of this nation's population will be affected.

The biggest contrast is the preparation and recovery by federal, state and local governments. We fell asleep with Katrina. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, was in a total "fog". Applicable National Guard response was initially lethargic and very slow. The Governor of Louisiana was in a state of "ice". The Department of Homeland Security and the military were equally slow and inept. Our governmental activities concerning Katrina were initially a national disgrace. It was the darkest days of the George W. Bush administration.

This time, with Irene, it is going to be so different. Every state's governor and major cities' mayor are totally proactive. Mandatory evacuations have taken place as opposed to the Katrina preparation. Respective National Guard units are in place ahead of the storm. FEMA is everywhere and providing valuable information and recommendations to the general population and elected officials. If needed, the Army stands ready. Power providers have recruited thousands of workers from unaffected states and they are in place ready to start the recovery. This promises to be a very proud endeavor for the nation. President Obama as opposed to President Bush may be positioning for his greatest moment.

FEMA Administrator Charles Fugate is a great communicator and motivator of his people. They are all in a "gung ho" mode over at FEMA. Katrina's FEMA Administrator Michael Brown was a failure. A terrible communicator and totally unqualified for the critical position, he went down in disgrace.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano is certainly on the case. Her hands on approach is contagious to everyone involved. Her commitment is to the safety of all of the people is clear and evident and certainly welcomed. Her predecessor Secretary Chertoff was of the opposite ilk. What is most shameful today about this guy is that he probably made millions of dollars selling full body scanners to TSA at our airports. He set up the process to require them and then, after leaving, started selling them to his old agency. What a racket!

May we never repeat our lack of efficiency demonstrated during the Katrina debacle. It wasn't the hurricane damage that caused all the pain. It was a total lack of preparation and a very inadequate response afterwards. New Orleans got through the hurricane but the flooding due to the mysterious levy breach is what caused most of the pain and tragedy. Everything ugly appeared and festered.

I remember hearing an accounting of the subsequent activity by an employee of the Sonesta Hotel in the French Quarter of New Orleans. He recalled all of the special operations military personnel and private firms like Blackwater staying at the hotel. They would sleep and rest during the day and at sundown they would go out in full uniform and equipment as if they were going into battle. Through the night you would hear gun fire. In the morning they would return back to the hotel dirty and sweaty. It was a very sad point in America.

Hopefully, the contracting activity resulting from the rebuilding after Irene won't emulate that of Katrina. I had to fight and fight to get Black businesses into the door. Finally, President Bush stepped in and opened the doors. In the end, we had over three billion dollars in contracts. It wasn't easy and I had to go vocal and contentious before it happened. Hopefully, not this time as we have learned from the past. We will database every applicable trade opportunity and email all potential Black contractors asking if they are interested in the rebuilding. We will then take that list and put it in the face of every sole source prime contractor and federal agency letting the contracts out. From there, we will weekly track the progress and verify the stated activity. What a difference six years can make.

There will be other disasters. If we do this correctly we will have a model for future events. Our businesses will be in the mix and our people will not have to share such pain. America will return to its greatness when it comes to responding to hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes and other calamities.

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