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CROSS COUNTRY

When Red Tape Trumped Common Sense

By **BOBBY JINDAL**
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BATON ROUGE, La. -- Over the past few days, America has been both moved and disturbed by television footage of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. But for those of us in Louisiana still struggling to cope, the troubling images are of opportunistic politicians playing the blame game while there is so much real work to do.

Rather than point fingers, we should be fixing the situation on the ground. And that will include taking steps to ensure that red tape doesn't stifle the continued security and rebuilding efforts.

There have already been a number of instances in which an overly inhibitive bureaucracy prevented an appropriate response to the disaster. For example, on Wednesday of last week a company called my office. With only three hours before rising waters would make the mission impossible, they were anxious to send a rescue helicopter for their stranded employees. They wanted to know who would give them a go-ahead.


We could not identify the agency with authority. We heard that FEMA was in charge, that the FAA was in charge, and that the military was in charge. I went in person to talk with a FEMA representative and still could not get a straight answer. Finally we told the company to avoid interfering with Coast Guard missions, but to proceed on its own. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness is better than asking for permission.

This is not the only story of red tape triumphing over common sense. After so many years of drills and exercises, we were still unprepared for Hurricane Katrina.

A mayor in my district tried to get supplies for his constituents, who were hit directly by the hurricane. He called for help and was put on hold for 45 minutes. Eventually, a bureaucrat promised to write a memo to his supervisor.

- Evacuees on a boat from St. Bernard Parish could not find anyone to give them permission to dock along the Mississippi River. Security forces at one port, they say, were prepared to turn them away.
- A sheriff in my district office reported being told that he would not get the resources his office needed to do its job unless he emailed a request. The parish was flooded and without electricity!

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- Unbelievably, first responders were hindered by a lack of interoperable communications. Do you recall how New York police and fire departments on 9/11 could not talk with each other? Four years later, despite billions spent on homeland security, state, federal, and local officials in Louisiana had the same problem.

My office became so frustrated with the bureaucracy that we often turned to private companies. They responded more quickly and flexibly.

After our staff visited communities to assess local needs, Budweiser delivered truckloads of water and ice. Ford provided vehicles for search and rescue. Every company we contacted provided goods and services without compensation.

Though things are far from perfect, we have seen an improvement in the response effort as the military increased its presence and created a more unified chain of command. However, the problems that existed before still resonate.

That's why we need, in the future, a single, strong leader with the power to override the normal process restrictions and get things done. That individual must be identified from the very beginning. But below that person, others up and down the line need to know they can make obvious and sensible calls in an emergency.

Spending my days on the ground in Louisiana last week, I did not see much television. But I understand that some media let the violent and destructive acts of a few overshadow the many acts of compassion and heroism.

Contrary to the pictures you may have seen, the vast majority of New Orleanians did not take to the street with weapons -- far more risked their own safety to help neighbors and strangers.

When first responders said they needed more flat boats to pick people out of the water, they were overwhelmed by the line of volunteers. When people at a shelter in Baton Rouge announced they needed drinks, within hours they were flooded with more Gatorade than they could possibly use.

Churches throughout Louisiana opened their doors to take in evacuees. Individuals organized a network to open their homes to strangers, using phone trees and the Internet to link up those in need with those who care. Evacuation centers were inundated with volunteers and supplies.

Many rescue and relief workers, themselves victims of Katrina, have not left their posts for days. Health-care staffers have hand-ventilated patients. Law enforcement officials braved high waters and violence. People from all over the nation are contacting me, especially people in areas recently devastated by their own tragedies, to offer assistance.

The first responders, in combination with our military forces, saved 9,500-plus lives, assisted 102,800 people, and evacuated 22,000 refugees. More than 9.9 million Meals Ready to Eat and 6.6 million gallons of water were distributed. As I write this column, 1,200 buses are in transit taking refugees to shelters across the country.

In coming days, there will be many more such stories, both tragic and heroic. There will be stunning examples of depravity, in which lives were needlessly lost and permanently damaged. But there will be inspiring examples of individuals who sacrificed all so that others might live.

There will also be situations in the future when people will rely on massive government support and help. We'll have to do better delivering it.

As I struggle to explain to my three-year-old daughter why her prayers that the hurricane spare our hometown were unanswered, we as a nation must make sure that we learn from our initial mistakes and cut through the red tape to help people rebuild their homes, their hopes and their lives.

Mr. Jindal is a Republican congressman from Louisiana.

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