

## HURRICANE KATRINA: Where do we go from here?

**Hurricane Katrina has caused a horrible tragedy for our country.** It is heartening that so many Americans have come together to contribute aid to the victims. We also need to ask hard questions and look to the future. Because it's clear that our government's ineffective response made this tragedy worse.

**We knew Katrina was coming and what it could do.** Since 2001, FEMA has ranked a hurricane striking New Orleans as "among the three likeliest" and "most catastrophic" disasters we face. Before Katrina hit, the National Weather Service said it could cause "human suffering incredible by modern standards." Yet Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff called Katrina "breathtaking in its surprise." And President Bush said "no one could have anticipated" the disaster Katrina left in her wake.

**FEMA was slow to respond even after Katrina hit.** FEMA Director Michael Brown didn't request emergency personnel until the Monday that the storm hit, and then gave them two days to arrive. Unused rescue vehicles were sitting near New Orleans as late as Wednesday. It took President Bush two days to organize a task force to coordinate the federal response. On Thursday, Brown said he didn't know there were thousands of people stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center with no food or water, even though the media had been broadcasting reports and images of them for 24 hours.

**FEMA was stocked with Bush cronies.** Maybe FEMA would've done a better job if it had been run by experts, like it was during the Clinton administration. Director Brown had no experience handling disasters and misrepresented himself numerous times on his resume. Five of eight top FEMA officials had virtually no experience in handling disasters. Three of the top five were rally planners from the Bush 2000 campaign. Every administration gives out jobs to cronies. But the Bush administration was incompetent enough to charge cronies with saving lives.

**The Bush administration has been gutting critical disaster-protection programs in the name of conservative ideology.** Year after year, President Bush requested less money than local officials said they needed to guard against a catastrophic storm in New Orleans. Since 9/11, the Bush administration and conservatives in Congress have failed to invest in programs and organizations that protect our homeland, even as the war in Iraq has been stretching our other sources of protection, like the National Guard. When Katrina hit, one-third of Louisiana's National Guard troops were in Iraq. Rather than invest in homeland security, President Bush chose tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy. And Katrina showed how an under-resourced homeland security infrastructure performs – terribly.

**Katrina confronted us with the prevalence of poverty in America.** Poor people suffered most from Katrina. They lived in the areas most vulnerable to flooding, and it's hard to escape a hurricane when you don't have a car or money for a bus ticket. The ranks of poverty-stricken Americans have swelled dramatically under the Bush administration. In the last year alone, 1.1 million people fell into poverty. All told, 37 million Americans are living in poverty today.

These facts raise genuine concerns: Is America getting stronger or more vulnerable, under our current leadership? If conservative leaders in Washington failed this badly in response to a disaster everyone knew might be coming, how will they handle one that comes out of nowhere, like a terrorist attack? And how are they preparing America for the other challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from terrorism to our dependence on foreign oil, from global warming to a rapidly changing world economy to the growth of poverty within the United States?

We should demand a government that's prepared to meet our most pressing challenges. We can do better. To learn more, go to [www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org) and [www.campusprogress.org](http://www.campusprogress.org).

**Please give generously to the victims of Katrina: [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org), [www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org) or [www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org).**