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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman,
Committee on Government Reform Hearing on
"Back to the Drawing Board: A First Look at
Lessons Learned from Katrina."
September 15, 2005

Hurricane Katrina was a disaster of monumental scope. It destroyed a major American city and forced a million Americans from their homes. The financial costs will be immense and the human costs incalculable.

As the nation confronts this disaster, we in Congress have two major challenges. First and most important, we must care for those who have been harmed and uprooted. They have been through a horrible ordeal, and we need to provide assistance with housing, medical care, and schooling. And we need to begin the process of rebuilding.

Our second challenge is to find out how this could have happened.

The Committee recently received an extraordinary document. It's a FEMA document from May 2004. And it predicts that a hurricane striking New Orleans could cause — and I quote — a "mega-disaster." Over a year before Katrina, FEMA was predicting that a category 4 hurricane could hit New Orleans, flood the city, and force a million people to evacuate.

FEMA recognized that such a hurricane would — and I quote — "create a catastrophe with which the State would not be able to cope without massive help." The document then states: "the gravity of the situation calls for an extraordinary level of advance planning."

I ask that this document be made part of today's hearing record.

As this remarkable document shows, Hurricane Katrina wasn't a surprise. This wasn't a disaster that no one could predict. Over a year ago, FEMA knew that a category 4 hurricane could cause a "mega-disaster," that the state was not prepared to cope without massive federal intervention, and that an extraordinary level of advance planning was needed.

Yet apparently, FEMA — and the rest of the government — was caught unprepared.

Congress has a responsibility to find out why our government failed so miserably when the stakes for so many Americans were so high.

There is a dispute in Congress about how to conduct an investigation. The House and Senate Republican leadership have proposed a bicameral investigations committee, but they want Republicans to control the committee and did not consult Democrats in developing the proposal. The Democratic leadership is rightly skeptical and has proposed a truly independent commission.

As the principal oversight committee in the House, we have an obligation to conduct our own independent investigation. And if we are serious about this — as the Chairman has indicated he is — there are two steps we should take right away.

First, we should request basic documents from the agencies. I have given the Chairman drafts of letters that should go to the Department of Homeland Security, the Corps of Engineers, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the White House that seek information that any credible investigation needs. These letters ask basic questions, such as what was the plan for responding to the hurricane and how was it implemented. I hope that we will be able to announce today that we've reached a bipartisan agreement to proceed with these document requests.

Second, we need to hear from Michael Brown and Michael Chertoff. These are the two government officials most responsible for the inadequate response, and the Committee should call them to testify without delay.

Today's hearing is entitled *Back to the Drawing Board: A First Look at Lessons Learned from Katrina.* I look forward to hearing from the distinguished witnesses the Chairman has called, but I must admit that I am perplexed by the timing of the hearing. It's going to be hard for DC, Miami, and Los Angeles to know what lessons to draw from Katrina until we fulfill our obligation to investigate the disaster in New Orleans and find out what went wrong and why.

It's too early to know what the lessons of Katrina are. But it's not too early to learn lessons from the waste, fraud, and abuse that has characterized the reconstruction in Iraq and the spending of the Department of Homeland Security. Over the last five years, the record of the Administration's handling of federal contracts has been one of persistent and costly mismanagement. Under this Administration, the value of no-bid contracts has skyrocketed. Oversight of federal contracts has been turned over to private companies with blatant conflicts of interest. And when government auditors and whistleblowers do flag abuses, their recommendations are often ignored.

In Iraq, billions have been appropriated for the reconstruction effort, yet oil and electricity production remain below prewar levels. Waste, fraud, and abuse by Halliburton and other contractors have squandered hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars. And domestically, the record is no better. The FBI spent $170 million on a "Virtual Case File" system that does not work. The Department of Homeland Security spent another $200 million on a border-monitoring system of cameras and sensors that also doesn't work. And the contract to hire federal airport screeners has been plagued by poor management and flagrant abuses.

As we prepare to pour billions into the relief and recovery effort in the Gulf Coast, we cannot allow these mistakes to be repeated. We need contracting reforms and more and better oversight. The taxpayer cannot afford another blank check.

One of the fundamental constitutional obligations of Congress is to oversee the executive branch. Despite the efforts of the Chairman — who has asked more questions than most of his colleagues — Congress has too often failed to conduct meaningful oversight. And the consequences have been perilous. When we fail to insist on accountability, we reward blunders and invite abuse.

We must not travel this road again. As the entire nation now knows, government incompetence and a failure to insist on accountability can have dire consequences.