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Why do we need an 8/29 Commission?



The Preface to the 9/11 Commission report provides a compelling answer to this question: *We have come together with a unity of purpose because our nation demands it. September 11, 2001 was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States. The nation was unprepared. How did this happen, and how can we avoid such tragedy again?*

August 29, 2005 and the days that followed provided this nation with countless pictures of the misery and chaos associated with failure of the flood protection system for the greater New Orleans area. This disastrous failure was allowed to compound into a catastrophe as evacuation plans and measures failed one after another. In the following months, there has been and continues to be dysfunctional performance in recovery plans and operations. Lack of adequate foresight and preparation, leadership, and vision have been hallmarks of this great American tragedy.

So, where is the national demand for understanding and prevention of this type of tragedy? Where is the public outrage for the deaths of 2,000 Americans, 100,000 people who remain traumatized, displaced and homeless? Where is the outrage for the near-death of an important American city and segment of its culture? It has disappeared in the deafening roar of our war in Iraq and the intensifying conflict in this part of the world. It has disappeared from the national radar screen. A fundamental purpose of the 8/29 Commission is to put this catastrophe back on the American radar screen so we can learn its painful lessons and prevent future occurrences.

There have been many in-depth studies of how the failures of the flood protection system and the rescue and evacuation systems developed. These studies have all shown that this was a preventable catastrophe. Several of these studies have been performed by the organizations that bear primary responsibilities for development of the failures. Why should we expect to get true in-depth insights into the why's of the failures and how to prevent them in the future? The answer is that we should not have such unrealizable expectations.

We need an independent Commission with subpoena powers to understand truly why these failures developed so we can understand how to effectively prevent and respond to them in the future. This understanding needs to be focused on the organizational and institutional reasons for the 8/29 failures.

For the past several decades, floodwater in the United States has accounted for the single largest source of misery and economic loss attributable to natural sources. Since the mid-1980s, these losses have increased dramatically. It is apparent that floodwater hazards are a rapidly escalating national challenge that is not unique to the greater New Orleans area. We need to learn better how to address this national challenge before these early warning signs become more national catastrophes. This challenge is not basically a matter of lack of knowledge or technology. It is a matter of clear recognition of the hazards associated with floodwater. It is a matter of mobilization of the national will and leadership to mobilize this knowledge and technology. We need an effective organizational – institutional complex to address flooding hazards in ways that are friendly to nature, improve the quality of life, and are sustainable and resilient.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Bea".

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