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- [Washington](#)

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- [Iraq War Coverage](#)
- [Iraq - US Government: Contracting Issues](#)
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Chertoff delayed federal response, memo shows

By Jonathan S. Landay, Alison Young and Shannon McCaffrey
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON - The federal official with the power to mobilize a massive federal response to Hurricane Katrina was Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, not the former FEMA chief who was relieved of his duties and resigned earlier this week, federal documents reviewed by Knight Ridder show.

Even before the storm struck the Gulf Coast, Chertoff could have ordered federal agencies into action without any request from state or local officials. Federal Emergency Management Agency chief Michael Brown had only limited authority to do so until about 36 hours after the storm hit, when Chertoff designated him as the "principal federal official" in charge of the storm.

As thousands of hurricane victims went without food, water and shelter in the days after Katrina's early morning Aug. 29 landfall, critics assailed Brown for being responsible for delays that might have cost hundreds of lives.

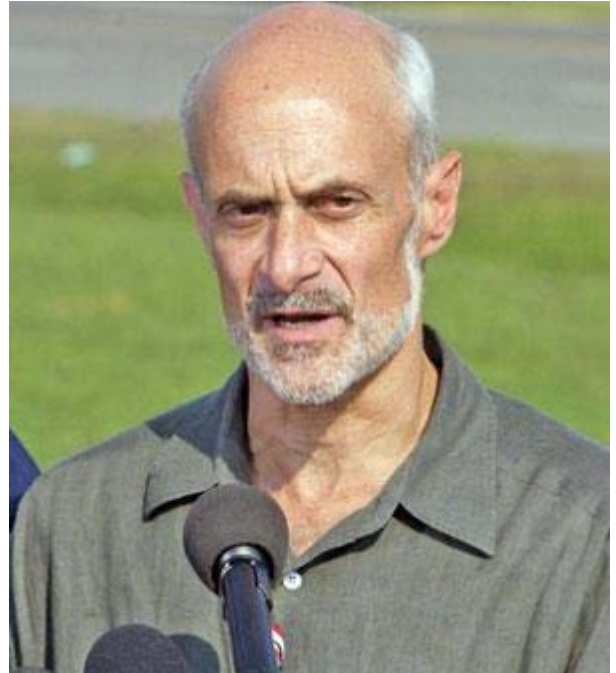
But Chertoff - not Brown - was in charge of managing the national response to a catastrophic disaster, according to the National Response Plan, the federal government's blueprint for how agencies will handle major natural disasters or terrorist incidents. An order issued by President Bush in 2003 also assigned that responsibility to the homeland security director.

But according to a memo obtained by Knight Ridder, Chertoff didn't shift that power to Brown until late afternoon or evening on Aug. 30, about 36 hours after Katrina hit Louisiana and Mississippi. That same memo suggests that Chertoff may have been confused about his lead role in disaster response and that of his department.

"As you know, the President has established the 'White House Task Force on Hurricane Katrina Response.' He will meet with us tomorrow to launch this effort. The Department of Homeland Security, along with other Departments, will be part of the task force and will assist the Administration with its response to Hurricane Katrina," Chertoff said in the memo to the secretaries of defense, health and human services and other key federal agencies.

On the day that Chertoff wrote the memo, Bush was in San Diego presiding over a ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II.

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Chertoff's Aug. 30 memo for the first time declared Katrina an "Incident of National Significance," a key designation that triggers swift federal coordination. The following afternoon, Bush met with his Cabinet, then appeared before TV cameras in the White House Rose Garden to announce the government's planned action.

That same day, Aug. 31, the Department of Defense, whose troops and equipment are crucial in such large disasters, activated its Task Force Katrina. But active-duty troops didn't begin to arrive in large numbers along the Gulf Coast until Saturday.

White House and homeland security officials wouldn't explain why Chertoff waited some 36 hours to declare Katrina an incident of national significance and why he didn't immediately begin to direct the federal response from the moment on Aug. 27 when the National Hurricane Center predicted that Katrina would strike the Gulf Coast with catastrophic force in 48 hours. Nor would they explain why Bush felt the need to appoint a separate task force.

Chertoff's hesitation and Bush's creation of a task force both appear to contradict the National Response Plan and previous presidential directives that specify what the secretary of homeland security is assigned to do without further presidential orders. The goal of the National Response Plan is to provide a streamlined framework for swiftly delivering federal assistance when a disaster - caused by terrorists or Mother Nature - is too big for local officials to handle.

Dana Perino, a White House spokeswoman, referred most inquiries about the memo and Chertoff's actions to the Department of Homeland Security.

"There will be an after-action report" on the government's response to Hurricane Katrina, Perino said. She added that "Chertoff had the authority to invoke the Incident of National Significance, and he did it on Tuesday."

Perino said the creation of the White House task force didn't add another bureaucratic layer or delay the response to the devastating hurricane. "Absolutely not," she said. "I think it helped move things along." When asked whether the delay in issuing the Incident of National Significance was to allow Bush time to return to Washington, Perino replied: "Not that I'm aware of."

Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, didn't dispute that the National Response Plan put Chertoff in charge in federal response to a catastrophe. But he disputed that the bureaucracy got in the way of launching the federal response.

"There was a tremendous sense of urgency," Knocke said. "We were mobilizing the greatest response to a disaster in the nation's history."

Knocke noted that members of the Coast Guard were already in New Orleans performing rescues and FEMA personnel and supplies had been deployed to the region.

The Department of Homeland Security has refused repeated requests to provide details about Chertoff's schedule and said it couldn't say specifically when the department requested assistance from the military. Knocke said a military liaison was working with FEMA, but said he didn't know his or her name or rank. FEMA officials said they wouldn't provide information about the liaison.

Knocke said members of almost every federal agency had already been meeting as part of the department's Interagency Incident Management Group, which convened for the first time on the Friday before the hurricane struck. So it would be a mistake, he said, to interpret the memo as meaning that Tuesday, Aug. 30 was the first time that members of the federal government coordinated.

The Chertoff memo indicates that the response to Katrina wasn't left to disaster professionals, but was run out of the White House, said George Haddow, a former deputy chief of staff at FEMA during the Clinton administration and the co-author of an emergency management textbook.

"It shows that the president is running the disaster, the White House is running it as opposed to Brown or Chertoff," Haddow said. Brown "is a convenient fall guy. He's not the problem really. The problem is a system that was marginalized."

A former FEMA director under President Reagan expressed shock by the inaction that Chertoff's memo suggested. It showed that Chertoff "does not have a full appreciation for what the country is faced with - nor does anyone who waits that long," said Gen. Julius Becton Jr., who was FEMA director from 1985-1989.

"Anytime you have a delay in taking action, there's a potential for losing lives," Becton told Knight Ridder. "I have no idea how many lives we're talking about. ... I don't understand why, except that they were inefficient."

Chertoff's Aug. 30 memo came on the heels of a memo from Brown, written several hours after Katrina made landfall, showing that the FEMA director was waiting for Chertoff's permission to get help from others within the massive department. In that memo, first obtained by the Associated Press last week, Brown requested Chertoff's "assistance to make available DHS employees willing to deploy as soon as possible." It asked for another 1,000 homeland security workers within two days and 2,000 within a week.

The four-paragraph memo ended with Brown thanking Chertoff "for your consideration in helping us meet our responsibilities in this near catastrophic event."

According to the National Response Plan, which was unveiled in January by Chertoff's predecessor, Tom Ridge, the secretary of homeland security is supposed to declare an Incident of National Significance when a catastrophic event occurs.

"Standard procedures regarding requests for assistance may be expedited or, under extreme circumstances, suspended in the immediate aftermath of an event of catastrophic magnitude," according to the plan, which evolved from earlier plans and lessons learned after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "Notification and full coordination with the States will occur, but the coordination process must not delay or impede the rapid deployment and use of critical resources."

Should Chertoff have declared Katrina an Incident of National Significance sooner - even before the storm struck? Did his delay slow the quick delivery of the massive federal response that was needed? Would it have made a difference?

"You raise good questions," said Frank J. Cilluffo, the director of George Washington University's Homeland Security Planning Institute. It's too early to tell, he said, whether unfamiliarity with or glitches in the new National Response Plan were factors in the poor early response to Katrina.

"Clearly this is the first test. It certainly did not pass with flying colors," Cilluffo said of the National Response Plan.

Mike Byrne, a former senior homeland security official under Ridge who worked on the plan, said he doesn't think the new National Response Plan caused the confusion that plagued the early response to Katrina.

Something else went wrong, he suspects. The new National Response Plan isn't all that different from the previous plan, called the Federal Response Plan.

"Our history of responding to major disasters has been one where we've done it well," Byrne said. "We need to figure out why this one didn't go as well as the others did. It's shocking to me."

To read the National Response Plan, go to: http://www.dhs.gov/interweb/assetlibrary/NRP_FullText.pdf

Knight Ridder Newspapers correspondents Seth Borenstein and William Douglas contributed to this report.

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