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Homeland Security's extreme makeover

By Paul C. Light

NEW YORK - As the Department of Homeland Security proceeds with its own recovery from hurricane Katrina, Americans have to wonder what, if anything, can be done to make sure the nation is ready for catastrophes such as earthquakes and terrorist attacks that come without warning.

The department and its secretary, Michael Chertoff, cannot move fast enough to rebuild public confidence given the woeful lack of preparedness among the American public. According to a soon-to-be-released survey by New York University, most Americans are unprepared for an actual event, unaware of their local government's plans for response and recovery, and deeply confused about what to do in the event of a catastrophe.

Asked why they are not more prepared, half say they need more time and money, half also say they do not know where to turn for advice, two-thirds say they wish they were more organized, and three-quarters say they just do not know what to expect. Having been told to expect everything, many Americans may have concluded that they can prepare for nothing.

Moreover, the lack of preparedness is particularly sharp among the people who got left behind in New Orleans. Less educated, lower-income Americans are far less likely to know what to do and where to turn to prepare, and cannot last a matter of hours on their own, let alone a few days after tragedy strikes. This "preparedness divide" between rich and poor must move to the top of the homeland security agenda if the nation is to prevent the kind of chaos that followed Katrina.

Homeland Security cannot fix all these problems overnight, but it can get much better at preparing for catastrophe. Indeed, Mr. Chertoff is just about the only official in Washington who can say "I told you so" about the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). He gave Congress and the Bush administration an outline of a more effective department last July, two months before Katrina hit. Unfortunately, Congress and the president soon took off on long vacations, and Chertoff's reforms were shelved until last week.

Led by Sen. Susan Collins (R) of Maine, Congress finally took up the reforms and added them onto the homeland security appropriations bill. President Bush will get the bill this week, and should sign it right away.

Toward greater alertness, Chertoff's reforms include a new Office of Intelligence and Analysis that would integrate information as it flows upward from the 10 different intelligence units contained within the department. Doing so would reduce the department's dependence on CNN for breaking news on the outside world.

Toward greater agility, Chertoff's package abolishes an entire layer of bureaucracy standing between him and the three huge operating units responsible for policing the airports, borders, subways, and seaports.

Toward greater adaptability in the wake of future catastrophes, Chertoff's reforms would put him firmly in charge of his disaster planners - an operations unit that would create a single command center for future crises, and, most important, an office of preparedness that would bring the bloated state and local grants program under tighter management. The preparedness unit would also strip FEMA of responsibility for public education, thereby allowing the beleaguered agency to focus on its primary response and recovery mission.

Finally, toward greater mission alignment, Chertoff's bill gives him more than enough authority to focus his department's attention on the most serious risks to US security, whether natural or man-made. Chertoff is ready to admit that his department cannot plug every hole in the border, just the most important ones.

By abolishing layers of needless bureaucracy and consolidating disparate units into mission-centered divisions, Chertoff proposed the unthinkable in Washington: flatten a government department and make himself more accountable for what goes right and wrong in his organization. It is a lesson every political appointee should learn.

The one area Chertoff cannot reform is Congress itself, which remains a nightmare of competing committees and subcommittees that add little by way of consistent oversight of homeland security readiness. Nor can Chertoff force Congress to fully fund the training needed to implement the new personnel system, provide private incentives to develop new technologies in joint partnerships, or fill the growing number of vacancies in frontline agencies such as Customs and Border Patrol.

Nevertheless, Chertoff's outline is the most assertive reorganization of an existing department in recent memory. Chertoff's package dwarfs the effort to reorganize the Energy Department in the wake of the Los Alamos controversy, the Internal Revenue Service after the taxpayer abuse scandal, and rivals the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Department realignments of the mid-1980s for its potential yield in greater coordination.

Now that Congress has given Chertoff the needed authority to put his department through an extreme makeover, the president should sign the bill quickly, pat Chertoff on the back, and give him the running room to succeed. Now is not the time for further posturing about who did what after Katrina. It is time to recover from the recovery.

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