

# We are all accountable

By Paul Manna & Teresa Gorbett

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Commentators across the political spectrum have criticized federal, state, and local officials for their seemingly inept response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Charges that political cronyism led to poor performance in key agencies and that bureaucratic turf wars prevented governments at all levels from collaborating are two common themes that have emerged.

Congress has now begun hearings on these matters, and President Bush has promised an investigation of his own to examine what went wrong. One apparent goal of the inquiries will be to hold agency officials accountable for management failures that occurred in New Orleans and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast.

The parade of potential villains has begun. The most notable is Michael Brown, the former head of FEMA, whom Bush famously praised as doing a heck of a job even as the federal government's response proved lackluster.

Agency leaders must be held accountable for their actions. But the weak government response to Katrina, in particular from FEMA, ultimately stems from the American public's indecisiveness about what it wants its public sector to be. Americans' love-hate relationship with public agencies means that we all



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shoulder some blame for the tragedies that befell Katrina's victims.

Citizens fear government bureaucracies operating independently from political control even though greater freedom might enable public sector workers to be

more responsive to needy individuals. Elected officials frequently express these views too. The idea that nameless, faceless bureaucrats are somehow indifferent to the health, safety and happiness of American families is the theme that peppers the speeches of politicians of all stripes.

As a society, how have we chosen to protect ourselves from the injuries that rogue agencies and their supposedly self-aggrandizing leaders might inflict upon us? In general, to control government bureaucracies Americans typically have supported political control of public-sector agencies. In other words, we link agencies to the elected branches of government in part by allowing partisan officials to choose their top leaders.

Given that arrangement, it should not surprise anyone that sometimes political appointees reach their posts not because of their policy knowledge, but because of whom they know. Citizens should recognize that this unpleasant result does not necessarily emerge from a sinister cronyism that infects our elected leaders.

In some cases it might, but more generally it is a logical consequence of tending to citizens' larger fears of an independent bureaucracy.

That is not to say that the alternative, ridding government agencies of political appointees, will produce ideal results either. Our point is that amid citizens' desires to have it all — bureaucracies subject to political control that nevertheless have competent leaders and effectively carry out multifaceted missions — people frequently overlook the trade-offs that their own preferences imply.

Overall, we gain some benefits and pay some costs when we embrace a system that allows political appointees to run our public agencies. Rarely do those costs manifest themselves as dramatically as they did in the aftermath of Katrina. But sometimes they do.

Rather than expressing shock that someone with minimal credentials could ever be running FEMA, citizens should recognize that their own desires help sustain a political system that will inevitably produce future Michael Browns. As much as we hate to admit it, at some level we are all accountable for the government's response to the Katrina disaster.

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