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ADVICE+DISSENT:
Viewpoint
Crisis of Contracting

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Procurement missteps after Katrina signal government's failure to work as a system of systems.

Contracting took a rap in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. While acknowledging the urgency of getting aid to victims, critics lambasted the federal government for numerous purchasing mistakes. With many competent and well-trained procurement professionals in the federal workforce governed by mountains of rules and regulations, why did Katrina once again reveal a pattern of failure?

Federal contracting personnel had every authority they needed to work efficiently, effectively, legally and with adequate checks and balances. A primary failure was the lack of defined responsibilities and requirements for emergency contracting. But this procurement failure was only symptomatic of the federal government's appalling inability to function as a system of systems, as an integrated, coordinated whole. And when state and local governments are added to the mix, the federal part is even less apparent.

In simpler times or when problems are single-faceted, this failure to function "federally" as a disciplined, interconnected system could be obscured. Not so with "megaproblems," described by Army Col. Christopher Paparone even before Katrina as a "network of problems that are interconnected, interactive, creating complexity on a grand scale." When addressing megaproblems, the inability to act as a system of systems is catastrophic, producing a confused response that only worsens the situation.

Not surprisingly, lessons from previous disasters share three themes: lack of sharing, lack of coordination and communication, and failure to develop and train in strategic (governmentwide) and tactical (agency-

specific) planning. Read the 9/11 commission's findings, NASA's *Challenger* and *Columbia* shuttle accident investigations, or almost any government after-action report for a litany of recidivism and lessons yet to be learned.

Government cannot improve its ability to respond to disaster until relevant knowledge and experience are integrated across the board. It must develop a truly federal system that can harness its massive capabilities, including those of the private sector, scale its system of systems up or down as needed, and learn and adjust in real time.

The focus on fixing the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Homeland Security Department might help in the short term, but it won't correct the root cause of government's problems. Nor will finally developing a much needed emergency contracting cadre or undertaking a multitude of unconnected post-Katrina studies.

The administration must take the lead in building a system of systems. Only the president has the authority to break down barriers, drive legislative changes, integrate lessons learned at all levels, require systems for dealing with megaproblems to be interoperable, and direct training to provide continuous improvement. Because these actions are interagency and intergovernmental, the president must appoint one agency or intergovernmental team to lead. He must require accountability and cooperation, and provide adequate resources to sustain this effort.

This administration should begin now to set the strategic vision and to prioritize and implement urgent interim actions guided by the system-of-systems concept. A first step is to ensure coordinated, effective communication at all levels, governed by standardized protocols and common objectives. If political leaders acknowledge that the real problem is failing at federalism and initiate systemic change, perhaps they can regain some of the trust that was squandered in dealing with Hurricane Katrina.

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